

# Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



## **Romans 4:13-25** **“Trust From Start To Finish”**

September 4, 2016  
(16th Sunday After Pentecost)

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## **“Following Christ From City Center!”**

ROMANS 4:13-16a, 16b-25 "TRUST FROM START TO FINISH"

History Is Not Irrelevant, It's Not Even Past!

2' 4:13-16a THE PLACE AND MEANING OF GRACE AND LAW FOR JEW & GENTILE.

Thesis: The Promise Was From Grace, Through Faith, With Hope

a) v.13 Thesis: Promise To The Descendants Is Through Grace And Faith. //Gal. 3:6-15

Thesis: Faith = Trust In/ Obedience To/ Conviction That

13 The promise to Abraham and his descendants (seed) that they should inherit the world (cosmos), Gen. 15:6, Mt. 5:5 did not come through the law dia (2x), Given 400+ Years Later, Inherit = New World, Resurrection but through the righteousness of faith (trust). Summary: His Descendants Are Jews And Gentiles

Promise (s) = 15:5, 8, 17:4-5, 18:18, 22:17-18, Sir. 44:21, Descendants, Land

b) v.14 Comment 1: Law And Faith Are Mutually Exclusive.

Foundation Of Grace Undergirds God's Promises

14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, Jews, Promise (vv.13, 14, 16, 20) faith is null and the promise void. Assumes The Historical Priority Of Faith Over Law

Paul's Distinction by faith vs. by law Is Unheard Of In Judaism!

b') v.15 Comment 2: The Law Brings Awareness Of Sin: Wrath.

Faith Is The Response Of The Whole Person To God

15 For the law brings wrath, Primary Purpose: Law Brings Knowledge Of Sin/ Awareness but where there is no law there is no transgression. 3:20, 5:13, 20; 7:7, Don't Know Wrong

Not Saved By My Faith; Faith Is Not A Work; It's Object Is A Person! Ongoing Trust

a') v.16a Promise To Descendants Through Grace And Faith // vv.11b-12.

vv.13-16a Promise Rests On Grace, vv.17-25 Promise Appropriated By Faith

16 That is why it depends on faith, God Initiates Promises, We Trust/Respond, A Dance God Leads! in order that the promise may rest on grace Grace/Faith/Promise = One Reality, Works/Law/Sin = Another and be guaranteed to all his descendants not only to the adherents of the law (Jews), seed, For Gentiles Also but also to those who share the faith of Abraham. Grace = God's Initiative, Faith = Aided Trust

Jesus Has Included Gentiles, How Do We Make Sense Of This?

1' 4:16b-25 HOW ABRAHAM RECEIVED THE PROMISE THROUGH FAITH. Encomium Of Praise!

Abraham Has Clock Turned Back, Jesus Turned Forward To New Age!

a) vv.16b-18 What Scripture Says: Genesis 17:5 (LXX), 15:5, + 2 Creedal Affirmations.

2 Ways To Be A Father: Physical Paternity, Spiritual Paternity

[S1] b 1a For he is the father of us all, Ring: a (quote/nations)-b (believed)-c (life)//c' (existence)-b' (believed)-a' (quote/nations) b 17a b as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations," Nations = Gentiles (Faith), Gen. 12:3, 17:5, // Sir. 44:19 b 2 in the presence of God in whom he believed (he faithed), Not Faith-In-Faith, Faith = Object+Content+Trust! c Creed 3 who gives life to the dead 2 Cor. 4:14, 2 Creedal: God, who... and, 1) Resurrection, 2) Creation d 3' and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Ex Nihilo, 2 Macc. 7:8, 2 Enoch 24:2, 2 Bar. 21:4 18a 2' In hope he believed (he faithed) against hope, Radical Trust, A Kind Of Resurrection Faith, 2 Cor. 1:9 b 1'a that he should become the father of many nations; //17:5, i.e. Gentiles c [S2] b as he had been told, "So shall your descendants (seed) be." Gen. 15:5

Eighteen Benedictions, "... for you make the dead alive."

b) v.19 Comment 1: He Did Not Weaken In Faith In The Face Of Contrary Evidence.

Life To Old Bodies // Gives Life To Dead Bodies

19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, He (100), Her (90), Contrary To Experience (which was a good as dead because he was about a hundred years old,) He Did Not Ignore Empirical Evidence or when he considered the barrenness (deadness, nekrosin) of Sarah's womb. Gen. 17:17, 24, 21:5

Promises: Child/Land/Blessing + Demand: Leave Home, Trust + Obey

b') vv.20-21 Comment 2: He Did Not Waver In Faith But Rather Grew Stronger In Trust.

No Human Hope For New Life, 17:15-17?

20 No distrust (unfaith) made him waver concerning the promise of God, 1:5, apistia = Opposite Of Trust but he was made strong in faith as he gave glory to God, p.v., 1:20-23, Faith Grows, Trust Evidenced In Praise 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he promised. Hagiographic, Trusted God's Integrity

Faith = Trust In/Conviction That/Obedience In

a') vv.22-25 What Scripture Says: Genesis 15:6 + 2 Creedal Affirmations. Scripture Across Time

Faith/Trust = Faithful To Covenant Relationship, // Righteousness

[S3] 22 This is why faith was "reckoned to him as righteousness." //v.3b, 9-10, (Inclusion), Gen. 15:6 Called (Gen. 12:4, [75]), Declared Righteous (?), Ishmael's Birth (16:16, [86]), Circumcise (17:24, [99]) 23a But the words "it was reckoned to him," were written not only for his sake alone, (24) but for ours also. 1 Cor. 9:10 b It will be reckoned to us who believe (who faith) in him Future Tense, The God Who Raised Jesus Dealt With Our Sin that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, p.v., God Re-defined: who + and (v.17b/v.25), We Will Be Raised! 25 1 'who was handed over/ for our trespasses, p.v., 3:25, 2 Parts, God who...and 1) Sin, 2) New Relationship Creed 2 and raised/ for our justification./ p.v., dia (for/because), our right-wising, Couplet // LXX Is. 53:5,12/ 53:11

### A Brief Treatment Of Romans 4:13-25

The structure of the next section (3:21-4:25) is a 4:2 ring pattern (A. 3:21-26, B. 3:27-31 // B' 4:1-12, **A' 4:13-25**). Exposition of God's apart-from-the-law righteousness is in the frames (A//A'), the questions and answers of diatribe (B//B') at the center. The unit falls into two paragraphs: 1) 4:13-16a, 2) 4:16b-25. The noun for *faith* (Gk. *pistos*) and the verb *to believe* (*pisteuo*), and well as its negation *distrust* (*a-pistia*), tie the two paragraphs together (vv.13, 14, 16 [2x], 17, 18, 19, 20 [2x], 22, 23) through a theme word. A double use of *dia* in v.13, through the law and through the righteousness of faith, is parallel to two uses of *dia* (translated as *for*) in v.25, for our trespasses and for our justification.

The structure of 4:13-16a is a 4:2 ring (a-b//b'-a') with *promise/descendants/law/faith* as inclusions (vv.13//v.16a) and *law* used in each component (a-b//b'-a'). The thesis is that the promise given to Abraham and his seed is not a reward for obedience but received through trust (v.13). It is followed in b. v.14 by a reason beginning with *for* (*gar*), then in b' v.15 with a second reason beginning with *for*, and finally in a' v.16a with a conclusion, *This is why...* The question is, "How did the promises of God come to Abraham and his descendants, was it through trust alone or because of lawful performance of divine commands?" The promises to Abraham were three: a son to become a great nation, a new land, a blessing for all nations. To put these into a single *promise* in v.13 means they're a package. At the time of the promise, circumcision was not required and Torah hundreds of years off. God brought Abraham into a right relationship through divine grace and initiative which enabled trust, hope, and perseverance (vv.20-21). If the relationship had been *law-and-obedience* from the start (i.e. something earned), then the alternative dynamic of *promise-and-trust* would have had no place (v.14), and thus the Gentiles no place. The reason is that the law, once given, names transgressions, marks us guilty, and subjects us to wrath (v.15). The function is diagnostic, not therapeutic; it makes us aware of sin, but does not of itself heal our relationship with God, as Paul said, "for through the law is the knowledge of sin" (3:20//4:15). If no law, no lawbreakers; but with law, many! The *faith/trust* of Abraham is the gold standard and common way of access for Jew and Gentile. God's tribe, the Jews, are marked with the scar and subject to the law, but all must *trust* the God of promise because there's no putting God under obligation through ritual or moral obedience. Obedience is appropriate within an existing love relationship; it's not an entry ticket.

The next paragraph, 4:16b-25, is also a 4:2 chiasm (a-b//b'-a') with *believed/faith* (vv.17-18//vv.22-23), *life to the dead* (v.17c)//*raised from the dead* (v.23b), and Scripture quotations (vv.16b,18c//v.22) as inclusions. The thesis, beginning with *for*, is given in a. vv.16b-18. Two supportive reasons that Abraham neither weakened in faith (b. v.19) nor distrusted (b' vv.20-21) are followed by an inference beginning with *This is why* in a' vv.22-25. The form of argument in both paragraphs is thus the same: thesis + 2 reasons/comments + *This is why*. I find no commentators who note the 6:2 ring structure of a. vv.16b-18. An assertion using *father* (v.16b//v.18b) and supported by a Scripture quote on *many nations* (v.17a [Gen. 17:5] // v.18c [Gen. 15:5]) forms the frames (1//1'). The next inside layers (2//2') use the common phrase *he believed* (v.17b//v.18a). At the double center (3//3') we have a proto-creedal affirmation of resurrection (God... who gives life to the dead) and the Creator's power to speak things into being (and calls into existence those things that do not exist). This is parallel to the material in v.25 which uses the same *our Lord... who... and* form to make claims about the benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection: 1) sin is removed as a block to relationship (v.25a), and 2) we are called into a right relationship with the living Lord (v.25b). At the center (b//b') we learn that the faith God enabled was sustained against two threats: 1) weakening in the face of contrary evidence (b. v.19) and 2) being infested with *un-faith/distrust* (b' vv.20-21). Abraham did not ignore contrary physical evidence (i.e. no self-deception), and his trust was displayed in praise (ongoing worship). His was the gift of true, enduring confidence in God.

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## TRUST FROM START TO FINISH

*“in the presence of the God... who gives life to the dead,  
and calls into existence things that do not exist.”*

It was God the Creator, the life giver, who raised Jesus from the dead.

### R O M A N S 4 : 17 c-d

I'm told by an educator with whom I have close contact that the holidays of January and February are confusing for many third graders. The Rev. Martin Luther King holiday on the third Monday of January, and Presidents Day between the birthdays of Washington and Lincoln on the third Monday of February are a challenge. Three leaders in three centuries— 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup>— are celebrated in close succession, so to the mind of a third grader, since they are close on the calendar, they must have known each another. It makes a kind of sense if everything is now and there's no sense of history, no time line stretching from the present into the past on which events are arranged. Some of this ahistorical reasoning is developmental; their brains are not yet ready for such abstractions. Another part has to do with exposure and conversation; thus- like many issues— it's hardware and software, nature and nurture.

In order to find your place in time, *a sense of history* is a must;<sup>1</sup> in fact it's hard to be a Christian without a sense of all that came before since that is where the decisive events of were enacted, say the call of Abraham around 1900 BC and the birth and life of Jesus two thousand years ago that split time in half. Jesus was nearly as separated in time from his ancient ancestor Abraham as we are from him. This Jewish and subsequent Christian faith that emerged from it is not something new but old, ancient in fact, and if you're one of the curious

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief reflection, see, Gerald Schlambach, “A sense of history: some components,” [www.geraldschlabach.net/about/relationships/benedictine/courses/handouts/sense-of-history](http://www.geraldschlabach.net/about/relationships/benedictine/courses/handouts/sense-of-history).

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**Romans 4:13-25. . . . . 5**

modern people who believe only the contemporary is relevant, if *the here and now* is all that matters, then you'll have trouble maintaining anything more than a vague, cultural faith. God acted long ago for our full restoration, and the echoes of the founding events are still with us, else why be here today?

I'm not sure when a sense of history dawned, but my parents chuckled when I asked them to tell me about *the olden days* when they were my age, which was then about five. Our town had a Confederate monument to which we made pilgrimage as school children every year— black and white— on Confederate Memorial Day where we placed flowers at the base of a solitary marble obelisk, and how strange that seems today. It was a culture that glorified a great lost cause, a southern myth which has now withered under careful historical examination,<sup>2</sup> but in my childhood was still a face-saving way to deal with an ugly history of slavery and a crushing military and cultural defeat. But it gave me a sense of history, that we were effected now by things long past.

We also had a cemetery at Old St. David's Episcopal Church where British red coats under General Cornwallis were buried in a mass grave after a smallpox outbreak, so when my cousin David once asked my father to show him the *hysterical* sites of Cheraw, he gently corrected him that the word was *historical* and promptly took us down to see the place and rehearse the stories. My father and uncles were WWII veterans, so 1941-1945 was an event on my time line, as was 1914-18 because of my grandfather whose troop ship was about to leave Norfolk when the Armistice to end World War I was signed. And since we were southern and believed that the two most formative events in history were the birth of Jesus and the end of the Civil War, Christmas and 1865 were biggies in our cultural imagination. I did not realize how Southern I was till my freshman year at Wake meeting lots of students from up north who did not share my two mental markers of what was truly important in life.

Then, in addition to a growing time line of big events, came the

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<sup>2</sup> See Gary W. Gallagher, *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington, IN: I.U. Press, 2010), and more recently, Edward H. Bonekemper III, *The Myth of the Lost Cause: Why the South Fought the Civil War and Why the North Won* (Washington, DC: Regnery History, 2015).

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awareness— maybe about age ten— that some of the events that seem so long ago were not. William Faulkner was right, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."<sup>3</sup> I remember the shock I felt when I did the math on my grandfather Alford Turner, born in 1890 and whom I buried at age 87 in 1977 in my first official funeral. Youngest of eleven, he was born when his mother was fifty-two, and when I did the subtraction, I discovered the mother of the man I knew so well was born in 1838 when Martin Van Buren was President, and only a year earlier Andrew Jackson was still in office. She had children before the Civil War began and the last in 1890, and when I asked my mother how this could be, she smiled, "The Turner women are known for their fertility."

The mother of a man I knew all my life could have been— at birth— held by men who'd fought in the Revolutionary War alongside Francis Marion and Nathanael Greene. From me to 1776 in only two leaps! And frankly— I'm almost embarrassed to say— that's always amazed me, that what seems distant in years can be brought so near when the length of lives are considered. A sense of history, of the weight and significance of what has come before we arrived, helps locate you in the river of time and helps you appreciate the grand continuities of what God's been up to since the call of Abraham our forefather.

It was in a rich mix of learning and culture that I came to have an internal time line on which to hang events. Locating yourself in space is literally child's play when compared with the more difficult task of locating yourself within something as abstract and mysterious as time. What was the future only a moment ago is already history. It makes me dizzy to think of this thin membrane of the present creating the future as it advances towards its goal carrying with it all that came before. We live amidst glorious mysteries!

To understand the scope of Christian faith and to draw on its immense spiritual, moral, and intellectual riches requires a sense of history, what came before that shapes the present and opens up the future with hope and trust. To be a follower of Jesus in his church is to inhabit a large story strung across time and ending in the kingdom of God, which is the whole cosmos finally healed

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<sup>3</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Requiem\\_for\\_a\\_Nun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Requiem_for_a_Nun).

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and made new in the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. I'm thankful for learning the Apostles' Creed early on with its pithy summary of the great time line of our faith that runs from Creation through Christ and his Church to the Climax of history at his return. And this is our moment in the long flow, our time to love God and neighbor with all we are. The Romans were right. *Tempus fugit*, time flies. *Carpe diem*, seize the day!

### **TURNING TO THE TEXT**

Saint Paul, or Paul the Apostle, had a problem. He wasn't always *Saint Paul*, the one sent out by the risen Jesus, which is what the word *apostle* means. He was Paul of Tarsus, a great city in Asia Minor where he grew up as a faithful, Jew in a richly cosmopolitan environment full of Roman and Greek mythologies with their gods and goddesses, temples, festivals, and public immorality. He spoke Greek in the streets and read Hebrew in the synagogue. His training as a rabbi led him to Jerusalem to study under a great scholar Gamaliel. He was—in effect—a Ph.D. in Judaism and—like many of the serious in his day—had likely memorized the Torah, the first five books of the Jewish Scriptures: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. It was there on the hard disk for immediate recall; he needed no scroll but was himself a walking text.

Paul was a fierce Jewish advocate, and his zeal for God's law eventually led to his being a quality control enforcer for the Jewish ruling body in Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin. His portfolio was to deal with the unfortunate rise of *the Jesus people* who believed that their teacher—crucified by the Romans for sedition and under a Jewish curse as one *hung on a tree*<sup>4</sup> had been raised from the dead as Messiah and Lord; Paul's mandate was to crush this dangerous departure from the faith. Such people must be corrected and disciplined. Round them up for synagogue discipline, and—if you must—travel to Damascus to root them out from infecting other Jewish communities with their errors.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 21:23, Galatians 3:13.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 7:59-9:31. For an introduction, see Jerome Murphy-O'Conner, *Paul: His Story* (Oxford, England: OUP, 2004), Chapter 1, "The Early Years," 1-19; also E.P. Sanders, *Paul: The Apostle's Life, Letters, and Thought* (Minneapolis, MN:

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**Romans 4:13-25. . . . . 8**

It was on the way to Damascus that our friend Paul had an unexpected encounter, so important it's told three times in the Book of Acts.<sup>6</sup> Without warning, the curtain between the visible and invisible worlds was drawn back in a flash of light, and Paul was spoken to by the Jew he most hated, Jesus of Nazareth, whose living presence and probing question, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" meant that the followers Paul was persecuting were not wrong but right. Jesus had been raised after a cruel death as an innocent man and thus stamped fully approved by the highest authority, and that insight— and the call that came from it to offer Jesus to the Gentiles— scrambled Paul's world.<sup>7</sup>

Everything now had to be rethought in the light of this encounter. Paul now had a new set of lenses through which to reread the story of God and his chosen people. Jesus was a dangerous man, just not in the sense Paul first thought. He was not a false prophet but the truest. He was the promised Messiah, the Son sent to us from the Father in the power of the Spirit, the human face of Israel's God, and his every word and deed divine revelation. His death was not for his but for our sins since he had none; his resurrection meant he was not only alive and thus available, but drawing all people, Jews and Gentiles, into a new unity around himself. And Paul had hated him! I don't expect ISIS leaders or other ideologues to change without such an encounter.

It took Paul time to sort it out with the help of those who'd known Jesus in the flesh, mainly Peter the restored coward and James the Lord's younger brother. Peter was an expert in their three or so years together on the road, and James— who was not a disciple during the ministry— knew all that came before,<sup>8</sup> so between the two Paul had eyewitness testimony to the whole of who Jesus was, and that was the raw material for his massive rethinking of the entire Jewish project and how God was acting to fulfill the ancient promise to bless *all the nations* through Abraham. With each story and piece of information about

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Fortress, 2015), Chapter 2, "Paul Before His Call to be an Apostle," 13-82.

<sup>6</sup> 9:1-22, 22:4-16, 26:9-18.

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 1:11-24.

<sup>8</sup> John 7:5, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, especially v.7 on James.

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**Romans 4:13-25. . . . . 9**

Jesus, Paul’s first class mind was making multiple connections. A personal encounter gave birth to an intellectual revolution that continues to his day.

Compare this to our day where numbers of committed Muslims– even radical ones– many of whom memorized the entire Koran in Arabic as children, are regularly having dreams and encounters that lead them to faith in Jesus Christ and to the radical rethinking of their own religious tradition.<sup>9</sup> God is raising up new apostles from within the Muslim world to reach his Islamic children with the news of Jesus the Savior, the friend of Muslims, the one who fulfills the best of their tradition and sifts the rest.<sup>10</sup> And nothing is so disruptive for Jews or Muslims or Secularists or ex-believers, or even bored Christians! as an encounter with the risen Jesus– whatever form it takes.

Jesus is self-authenticating, and while he uses all sorts of materials and witnesses to make his case, he reserves the right to reveal himself as he wills and how and where. No cookie-cutter clones, no three steps or four ways, and that is because he’s not an idea but a living person, and no two relationships are alike. I can’t make him real to anyone; he’s not a genie who appears when I rub the bottle and say the magic words. I can tell you all about him, what his four bios teach, what he’s done for me and others, but finally– if he does not show himself to you in a way that’s self-authenticating– there’s nothing I can do except wait with you and pray. Jesus is not under our control. He’s as free as God, because that’s who he is, the Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity.

To be addressed by his presence is revolutionary, and if he is as alive and available as we claim, why should we be surprised at such stories across

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<sup>9</sup> A good place to start is Nabeel Qureshi’s testimony, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014). His new apologetic volume is, *No God but One: Allah or Jesus? A Former Muslim Investigates the Evidence for Islam and Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016)

<sup>10</sup> See Warren Cole Smith, “The rising tide of Muslim converts to Christianity,” *World*, 7/28/14, [world.wng.org/2014/07/the\\_rising\\_tide\\_of\\_muslim\\_converters\\_to\\_christianity](http://world.wng.org/2014/07/the_rising_tide_of_muslim_converters_to_christianity).

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**Romans 4:13-25. . . . . 10**

Christian history to our own day? The one we read about in the four gospels is still, as John Wimber loved to say, *doing the stuff!*<sup>11</sup> And one of the purpose of the four gospels, as I recently saw again for the first time, is so when he crosses our path today we'll recognize him as the same one we read about. You learn *who he is* and *what he does* in the book; you then seek him in life as a follower. A fresh experience becomes a new center of life and thought. And even if you're not seeking him, he may come looking for you, as with Paul; he knows what you are seeking more than you do! He reserves that right I am told.

Now as Paul reflected on Scripture after his encounter, and more particularly on the story of Abraham, the pagan forefather of the Jews beginning in Genesis 12, he came to an insight that had been conveniently ignored in recent Jewish tradition. In their zeal to honor Abraham, the teachers had airbrushed his portrait to make him more than he was, which is what we all do with our national heroes.<sup>12</sup> Legends grow and multiply; heroes get bigger and better over time. Most Jews of the day had a popular notion Abraham was always as they were, that he'd always kept the whole of God's law from the start. They confused the acorn with the oak tree, the stumbling founder with the mature image. He was always *one of us* and a worthy example: a strict monotheist from the get-go, meticulous about God's law, and the only way to enter his line and receive the promises is to do the same. And if you do these things, you will be in a right relationship with our God who will one day show the world he's the only true God. They even let a few Gentile converts in according to his plan. Do right and be on our Jewish team; first do your part, then God will respond and do his part. Your good works show God you are worthy of the benefits. Make sense?

“Wait a minute,” says Paul after his new reading. “That’s not what I read.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://johnwimber.net/?p=96>.

<sup>12</sup> For a helpful chart on the growth of Abraham's sterling reputation as an early monotheist and keeper of the whole Mosaic law in later rabbinic tradition, see Michael Bird, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2016), 143; also Ben C. Blackwell, et. al., *Reading Romans in Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), Chapter 6, “Sirach and Romans 4:1-25: The Faith of Abraham,” 66-72.

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**Romans 4:13-25..... 11**

Abraham was a convinced polytheist when the Lord addressed him with the promises of a son and a blessing for the nations.<sup>13</sup> God told him to leave family and land and start moving forward, and he did— which is a sign of trust. Then a bit later in Genesis 15 when God again appeared to clarify the promise about a biological son leading to a huge new tribe, it says, ‘And Abraham *believed the Lord*, and it was reckoned to him as a right relationship.’ This means the one we look to as our Jewish founder was already rightly related to our God for decades before the scar of covenant was imposed and hundreds of years before the law was transcribed. And if scar and law are the marks of us Jews, then for at least twenty-nine years our forefather Abraham was *not one of us*; he was an outsider who cooperated with and gave assent to God’s best gift, which is to trust God and his promises. Abraham was a Gentile believer!” Only later did he take the ethnic and legal marks of Judaism. This was Paul’s minority report.

“Imagine that,” says Paul, “this is the way the Gentiles and pagans I’m called to reach will come into our new faith as well, just like Abraham, by nothing but raw trust and self-abandonment to the Jewish God who showed up in Jesus and who opened their minds and hearts by the direct influence of the Holy Spirit. And the Jews who have the scar and the law must come in the same way. Not by claiming an insider track or appealing to heritage, but by trust. A scar mark us as members of a chosen tribe, but it cannot change the heart. Living with the rightness of God’s law only shows the magnitude of my sins, so my guilt is clear.<sup>14</sup> But these external signs and codes— good as they are— do not fix a broken relationship. In fact, if they convince me being a good Jew puts God in my debt as if I’m owed, further corrupts the relationship with pride.”

There are— according to Paul— only two paths to this God, and one is a dead end. There is the *grace-and-faith* model where God’s offers a new relationship as a gift apart from anything I do, and I say Yes because he helped me believe. The dead end model is the *obey-and-earn-it* model. If I’m good in a Jewish sort of way, then God rewards me with life as a payback. But no one can pull it off, because all are compromised; it’s a dead end from the start, and

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<sup>13</sup> Genesis 12:1-7.

<sup>14</sup> Romans 3:20, 4:14-15.

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yet many seek to follow it, then and now.

The two approaches are incompatible; both can't be true, and God has come in Jesus to demonstrate he's worth trusting. Jesus is God's final resume sent to a skeptical world, "Here are my credentials: a perfect life of love and healing, an unjust sacrificial death at the hands of a wicked world, and a glorious resurrection to insure I'm always near. What more is there?" To obey is a fruit of trust; it's not a ticket to get in, not something for which I earn points to trade for benefits. In dealing with God I have nothing to offer, and if I trust, even that's not my creation.<sup>15</sup> This is a God worth walking with all our days.

But if we think such trust was easy for Abraham because it was a gift, we're not paying attention. Learning to live with and lean on this new God was a challenge; after all, he was seventy-five when the long walk of trust began. He's been told he and Sarah will have a son, but her womb has always been empty and is now as good as dead; the vivid Greek word Paul uses is *nekrosis*. So if a baby of their own comes, as it does decades later when he's a hundred and she ninety, it will be *new life from the dead*, God calling into being something that did not exist, just as he did in the creation of the world *ex nihilo*, Latin for *out of nothing*, which- interestingly enough- is consistent with the current insights of big bang cosmology.<sup>16</sup>

Matter is not eternal, as the ancient Greeks thought. The universe had an absolute beginning point, a singularity before which there's nothing, and by that I do not mean empty space: I mean no matter, no time, no space, no quantum field of energy; you can't picture it because there was nothing to picture and no properties. Now one of our best arguments goes like this: Everything that begins to exist has a cause, and since the universe of space and time and matter began to exist (in the big bang), it too has a cause that must be other than

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<sup>15</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9.

<sup>16</sup> On the development of this theological idea in ancient philosophy and Judaism, see Charles Talbert, *Romans* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 120. On big bang cosmology, see Alister McGrath, *Mere Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), "Clue 1: Creation- The Origins of the Universe," 96-98.

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**Romans 4:13-25. . . . . 13**

creation, all powerful, and a supremes intelligence to explain such design, which sound a lot like the Creator of Jewish and Christian Scripture to me.<sup>17</sup>

So who was Abraham dealing with? Who was on the other side of their covenant.? The One who calls things into being with a word and who lit the fuse of the Big Bang, the One who gives life to the dead, as in the example of Sarah’s womb, and then in an astounding manner in the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead, which is at the end is promised to us all well. Abe’s new God gives life in Creation and new life in Resurrection, a very big God!

Yes, there were times Abe thought God has lost his phone number, long periods of nothing much happening, just living on the last word God gave before a new word came to light the next stretch of the road. And that is part of our common faith walk with Abraham, to stay engaged, to hope against hope when required , not because of who you are but because of who God is, the One who always keeps his promises. “I’m as good as dead,” thought Abraham, and he was right. “And so is Sarah’s womb,” and he was right again. Two old people and no baby. “But my God is not dead, and my God is a life-giver, so I’m going to walk one more day trusting the God who called me long ago. He will sustain us through hard times when the awe of religious experience is a faint memory. I will praise him, and he will strengthen me, so Abraham and Sarah sang a duet, “His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.”

It helps a lot that God is my encourager, as he was for Abraham. There are days I walk through a fog, days I feel overwhelmed with discouragement because of the people problems I face and the state of the United Methodist Church. Days when faith runs low and hope is just an impossible dream. Days when I pull up my pension plan on the web and ask, “When do I get my life back?” or, “Lord, when are you going to show up and reclaim your people?”

And if I wait a bit, and as I pray and do my duties, it never fails. God sends encouragement, and my spirits lift again. So faithful is God that when the

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<sup>17</sup> The Kalaam Cosmological Argument is the speciality of William Lane Craig as discussed in his *On Guard: Defending Your Faith With Reason and Passion* (Colorado Spring, CO: David C. Cook, 2010), Chapter 4, “When Did The World Begin?” 73-104.

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darkness descends and confusion reigns, I know life and light are already on the way. God and I, you see, have developed a track record, as did Abraham and God. So can you! Many are the encouragements of the faith, and you only know them by walking this way, by the lived experience of proving God true. So when someone asks, "What's the key?" I tell them, "I don't have one, and there aren't any, just trust and praise, keep walking, and keep your eyes open for a new God sighting." I'm being stretched, but not to the breaking point. Stress and rescue, stress and encouragement, stress and a new birth of hope: it's how God develops our faith muscles and how we're prepared for new assignments that require a bigger God than we've needed to this point.

### CONCLUSION

Several years ago in Britain, researchers went door-to-door asking about people's belief in God. One of the questions was: "Do you believe in a God who intervenes in human history, who changes the course of affairs, who performs miracles...?" In other words, the God of Abraham, of Jesus and Paul.

When published, the study took its title from the response of one man who was seen as rather typical of those who responded. He answered, "No, I don't believe in that God; I believe in *the ordinary God*."

How many of our friends and neighbors believe in just *the ordinary God*<sup>18</sup> How many of us have cut God down to our low expectations?

So what if we gave up on *the ordinary God*? The disengaged far off God who can be safely ignored, the little religious god who wants you to be nice. What if we were given a chance to shift our trust to the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God who filled a dead womb with a child of promise and who emptied a tomb of a dead body early one Sunday in Jerusalem? It's the only place new life is found. A dead womb opened, the tomb of a dead Jesus unsealed. What I need is not another new idea or a new program; what I need and hunger for is a fresh dose of divine life. We trust you, Lord!

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Al Mohler, *Words from the Fire* (Chicago, ILL: Moody Publishers, 2009), 38.

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