

## Justified to Care in a COVID-19 World

*Romans 4:13-25*

### Introduction

Everyone has expectations. Some expectations are legitimate, such as the expectation that my furnace will do its job during the cold nights of winter and heat my home. Another expectation that I have, that I feel is legitimate, is the expectation that when I go home to eat my lunch that the food on my plate was not poisoned by my wife. A not so legitimate expectation to have is that Cheyenne weather will be consistent during the Spring, or that my wife will prepare filet mignon every night for dinner to ease my suffering caused by the quarantine.

After fourteen years of marriage to his wife Mileva Marić, Albert Einstein was convinced that there was no hope for the romance to return to their marriage. So, he drafted a list of expectations that, he believed, would allow the two of them to remain together at least until their children grew up. The following is the list Albert drafted and his then wife agreed to honor:

- A. You will make sure:
  - 1. that my clothes and laundry are kept in good order;
  - 2. that I will receive my three meals regularly *in my room*;
  - 3. that my bedroom and study are kept neat, and especially that my desk is left *for my use only*.
- B. You will renounce all personal relations with me insofar as they are not completely necessary for social reasons. Specifically, you will forego:
  - 1. my sitting at home with you;
  - 2. my going out or travelling with you.
- C. You will obey the following points in your relations with me:
  - 1. you will not expect any intimacy from me, nor will you reproach me in any way;
  - 2. you will stop talking to me if I request it;
  - 3. you will leave my bedroom or study immediately without protest if I request it.
- D. You will undertake not to belittle me in front of our children, either through words or behavior.

A few months later, Albert's wife Mileva moved out of their home and moved with their children to from Berlin to Zurich. They eventually divorced five years later in 1919. I think that as intelligent as Albert Einstein was, it was foolish to believe that his expectations were reasonable.

I have three questions that I think can help you know whether your expectations are legitimate or reasonable:

- 1. Are your expectations attainable? *Planning a family trip is a reasonable expectation to have depending on where you are planning to visit for your family vacation.*

*Spending the weekend in Estes Park is probably attainable for many families; expecting that you and your family will be the first colonist to live on Mars is not.*

2. Are your expectations reasonable? *One of my expectations of my children is that they make their bed before they start their day in the morning. All three of them have the physical means to meet that one simple expectation; I am convinced that this is a reasonable expectation. An unreasonable expectation is if I believed that my 9 year old son should pay rent every month for his bedroom.*
3. Are your expectations dumb? *If your expectations are not legitimized or reasonable, then they are dumb. If those affected by your expectations are convinced that they are either impossible or irrational, then your expectations are dumb, and should be rethought. As intelligent as Albert Einstein was, his list was just plain stupid.*

Before entering Jerusalem one more time, Jesus instructed his disciples to find a colt that he would ride into the city as any king would do for his coronation. While on the colt, people spread out their cloaks and palm branches before Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem. The people did this because it was their expectation that Jesus would take his rightful spot as a descendant of Abraham, who was also in the line of the kings after David, but because it was unreasonable to the crowds that Jesus was really entering Jerusalem to attain what they could not by purchasing a righteousness they could never gain on their own. For the king and messiah to endure a cross before receiving the crown was foolish even though it is what the scriptures foretold. Jesus entered Jerusalem on what is now known as Palm Sunday to be, as the ancient prophets foretold: **“He was despised and rejected by men. He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities”** (Isa. 53:3-10). This would be the way God would bless the nations, but the way he did it did not meet the expectations of those who laid their cloaks and palm branches before him as he entered Jerusalem on final time.

When Abraham was first promised by God that, even in his old age, both he and Sarah would have a child, and through that child, become the father of an entire nation known as the Israelites, the promise may have sounded unattainable and unreasonable to the aged couple. Here is what God promised Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, **“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”** (Genesis 12:1–3).

If you are familiar with the story of Abraham and Sarah, you know that God did the impossible by blessing Abraham and Sarah with a child of their own even though she was well past the childbearing age and her womb was dead. The apostle Paul points to the story of Abraham as an example of how one is justified by faith before God. I want to share three things that we learn from Abraham’s life and Romans 4:13-25.

### **God is Greater Than Our Circumstances**

When God spoke to Abraham (known at the time as Abram), Abraham lived in the city of Ur and didn’t even worship or know the God of Creation. God told Abraham to go to the land he would

show him even though Abraham was unsure where that land was. Also, just so you know, Abraham was not a perfect man either. He lied about his wife being his sister to protect himself at risk of her harm... not once, but twice. Also, because the promise of a biological child seemed impossible to the Abraham and his wife, Sarah told Abraham to have sex with their servant by the name of Hagar to have their child of promise through her instead of Sarah.

For Sarah to have a child in her old age, was impossible physically, for she was in her late 80's when God swore to Abraham that she would give birth to a baby boy. Women in their 80's and 90's do not get pregnant. However, Abraham grew convinced that God would honor his promise by doing the impossible through his elderly wife. One of the big lessons for Abraham and Sarah that took some time for the two to learn was that the promise God made to them was not dependent on their ability. In fact, the promise of God was way beyond their ability to make happen. This is the difference between the God of the Bible and the idols of the nations: Idols always make promises that are conditioned on the ability of the worshiper to fulfill the promise of the idol. God's promise to Abraham and Sarah, as well as his promise of reconciliation, redemption, and justification, are solely dependent on his ability to fulfill His promises and not ours.

The law in the Old Testament showed us just how unattainable and unreasonable it was to believe that we could obey all of it. The purpose of the Law is to show us just how far short we come to meeting God's holy standard. Nothing that Sarah or Abraham did in their own might could change the fact that they were old and unable to get pregnant. Therefore, Paul wrote in verse 13, **"For the promise of Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith."** All that was required of Abraham and Sarah was just to believe that God could do and would do what he promised.

Listen, there is no circumstance in your life or in our world that is greater than God, even though it feels greater than your ability to change it. The point that the Law makes is that our sin problem is greater than our ability to fix it.

### **God is Sufficient to Meet Our Greatest Need**

How does one fix our sin problem? Paul tells us in the following verses: **"That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring..."** (v. 16). What is Paul talking about? What does he mean by, **"...the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring"**? The promise to Abraham was not only that he would have a son, but that through that son, all nations would be blessed through his bloodline. The blessing that was promised to Abraham was the redemption that would one day be made possible through his descendant Jesus.

The Bible provides a unified story of one to whom all others point. There is a better Adam who was perfectly obedient to the Law of God. There is a better Able whose blood screams "forgiven." There is a better Abraham who left the splendor of heaven to identify as one of us in perfect submission to build a new city. There is a better Moses who stands on our behalf as the mediator of a better and newer covenant. There is a better David who will reign and rule as the Prince of peace and the King of kings. The story of redemption is a story, from Genesis to Revelation, about a hero who would liberate us from sin and reconcile us to God.

Jesus is the one, through whom the nations will experience the blessing of God, because it is only through him that sinners can be reconciled to God. This is the point of verse 17; the God in whom Abraham believed was the God who gave life to the dead and called into existence things that never existed before. For Abraham and Sara, God raised Sarah's dead womb into a sanctuary of life for the promise of a future redeemer.

When God promised Abraham that he would make him a great nation for the purpose of blessing the nations, Abraham believed the promise, because of the one who made the promise. Abraham was convinced that if the promise maker had the power and authority over death, life, and the ability to bring forth that which did not yet exist, then he was able to make good on what he swore he would do Abraham and his wife. Verse 18 states that, **"In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations..."** The reason Abraham hoped against hope was because he knew that God would make good on his word.

### **God is the Foundation for Liberating and Justifying Faith**

Abraham finally experiencing the birth of his son through Sarah wasn't because of anything that Abraham had in himself; it was the sufficiency and power of a God who can do the impossible. Listen to how Paul describes Abraham's faith: **"No unbelief mad 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"** (vv. 20-21).

This kind of faith is the type of faith that God requires for a person to be counted righteous positionally. However, it is not a faith in anything, but faith in the promise of one who would bless the nations. Therefore, Paul concludes: **"That is why his 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"** (Romans 4:22-25).

The faith that Abraham had, and the faith that results in justification from our sins, is the rock-solid confidence of knowing that Jesus did the impossible when he lived the life we never could have lived, and then died the death that we should have died. John Piper described this kind of faith in the following way: "Faith is the act of our soul that turns away from our own insufficiency to the free and all sufficient resources of God."<sup>1</sup>

Where does this kind of faith come from? It comes from the conviction that it is God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than the resurrection of Jesus. It was their conviction that Jesus rose from the grave that liberated the disciples from the paralysis of unbelief to live out and proclaim the life changing power of the cross of Christ. It was not their faith that was their righteousness but the object of their faith that became their righteousness—namely Jesus!

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper. *Future Grace* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books; 2012), p. 182.

## Conclusion

There have been many seasons of hardship the Church has had to endure, but one of the main reasons it has been able to do so is because of the resurrection of Christ and what it means for those of us whose faith rests in the Savior who conquered sin and death. Jesus warned us pandemics and persecution would come and that we would not be exempt from such trials:

**Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven.... You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives. (Luke 21:10-11, 16–19)**

The early church father Polycarp was discipled under the apostle John and spent a lifetime following in pastoral ministry. It was illegal to follow Jesus in those days, but for Polycarp and every other follower of Jesus, it made sense to follow Jesus, because the resurrection validated everything about Jesus. Most of Polycarp’s Christian friends as well as many of the people he pastored were killed for their faith. It is estimated that in the first 300 years of the Church’s existence, nearly 7 million people had become followers of Jesus, and nearly 2 million were put to death because of their association with Him.

It is surprising that Polycarp lived into his 80’s. At the age of 86, however, it became clear that he would soon be arrested because of his faith in Jesus. Did Polycarp run and hide? No. When the soldiers arrived, he let them into his home. He was interrogated by the proconsul, Statius Quadratus, but not only remained unfazed, he engaged the interrogation by sharing the reason for his faith. Finally the Quadratus lost his temper and threatened Polycarp that if he refused say “Caesar is lord” he would be thrown to wild beasts or burned alive. Polycarp responded to Quadratus’ threats: “While the proconsul’s fire lasts but a little while, the first of judgment that are reserved for the ungodly cannot be quenched. But, why do you delay? Come, do what you will. Eighty and six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

Polycarp was sentenced to death before an angry crowd in a stadium for all to see. When Polycarp’s crime was announced to the crowd “Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian.” The crowd responded angrily: “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice or worship.” The crowd demanded that Polycarp be burned alive to which he replied, “It is necessary to be burned alive.” When the soldiers grabbed him to nail him to a stake to keep him from running from the flames, he stopped them and said: “Leave me as I am. For he who grants me to endure the fire will enable me also to remain on the pyre unmoved, without the security you desire from nails.” They lit the fire; Polycarp could be heard praying until his death.

How about you? In what ways is your faith in the resurrected Jesus freeing you to live for Jesus and care for others on levels that you have not considered before? What is it that COVID-19 can take from you when you have the promises of God because you have Jesus? You have been justified by your faith in Jesus to care for such a time as this.