

"Being Church God's Way"
(Values that Determine Vision)

Study 7

Spiritual Realism
(A Focus on Faith)

Passage: Romans 4:16-25

Verse (to ponder and/or memorize)

"He did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, **21** being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised" (Rom 4:20).

WHAT? (Summary of Sunday's sermon)

I don't know about you, but I find pessimists depressing. But optimists can be irritating if they oversimplify things and refuse to face up to reality.

Spiritual Realism

This morning we are going to look at an example of "spiritual realism." There is another word for it in the Bible. It's the word "faith." That may well seem like a massive over-simplification, but bear with me. We are going to examine a passage of Scripture that places the matter in perspective.

Read Romans 4:16-25 in at least two versions.

Context

The passage occurs in the wider context of an argument that Paul is presenting to the Romans. In a nutshell, he is showing that the gospel is for Gentiles as well as Jews. The Jews prided themselves on being children of Abraham, so he shows that Abraham is actually the "father" of all who believe. His bottom line is that faith is the only way to please God.

I. IF YOU ARE A SPIRITUAL REALIST, YOU FACE FACTS HONESTLY

- A. Bertrand Russell described faith as "a conviction that cannot be shaken by contrary evidence."
- B. Mark Twain was a little more down to earth. He said (tongue in cheek), "Faith is believing what you know ain't true."
- C. Many think of faith like that. You may hear people actually say something like this: There are two realms in which we live our lives. There is the everyday world in which we have to deal with hard reality; it is a world of facts. There is the world of religion; it is a world of faith, a realm where you ignore the facts and believe. (This is fuzzy thinking; nothing could be further from the truth).
- D. We don't have to commit intellectual suicide to believe. Faith is more than reason; it is not less than reason. It is supra-rational, not irrational!

E. Listen to what Paul says about Abraham:

¹⁸ Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." ¹⁹ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead.

- 1. Abraham took full cognizance of the fact that it was biologically impossible for him and Sarah to have a child.
- 2. You may like to re-acquaint yourself with some of the key moments in Abraham life with respect to Isaac.

Gen 12:3; 15:1-6; 17:1-22; 22:1-18

- 3. John Stott: "It is not that he ran away from the realities of his situation into a world of fantasy."
- 4. You don't have to ignore the facts. You can and should look them square in the eye.

II. IF YOU ARE A SPIRITUAL REALIST YOU FACE *ALL* THE FACTS HONESTLY

²⁰ Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. ²² This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness."

A. He brought God into the picture. Actually, God *was* in the picture; he simply recognized the fact, and that changed everything.

Paul anticipated this when he said, in verse 17,

He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

B. The Writer to the Hebrews says much the same thing:

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible (Heb 11:1-2).

C. Faith always looks at problems in the light of the promises.

D. This was the essential difference between the way Saul and the Israelites viewed Goliath and the way David saw him. ("Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" 1 Sam 17). Goliath didn't shrink; David simply brought the LORD into the situation. Suddenly the giant became a midget.

III. IF YOU ARE A SPIRITUAL REALIST, *YOU MAKE A DECISION AS YOU FACE THE FACTS HONESTLY*

A. He did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God . . .

B. The implication is that he was **quite deliberate** in his decision to believe. Faith is not just something that wells up involuntarily (either

you have it or you don't). There was a choice before him. He *wanted* to believe and he was strengthened in his faith.

The main reason people don't believe is that they don't want to believe. It is unwillingness to relinquish control and submit to God's authority, not intellectual problems or temperamental incapacity.

IV. IF YOU ARE A SPIRITUAL REALIST, YOU WILL FIND THAT THE DECISION TO BELIEVE HAS BOTH IMMEDIATE AND LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

A. That's what happened in the case of Abraham.

1. Immediate: "It was reckoned to him as righteousness."
2. But he did not immediately see the ultimate fulfillment of the promise.

The greatest fulfillment was in the coming of a single descendant and through him a vast company including you and me and millions of others.

B. We experience the same 'already/not yet' dimension.

SO WHAT?

1. How realistic was Abraham in expecting that he and Sarah would become parents in their old age?
2. How realistic are you when facing situations or making projections? When you evaluate a situation, do you make the unconscious assumption that God is in it or do you assume (unconsciously, of course) that he is not?
3. It seems as though Abraham had his doubts (*Genesis 15 and 17*). How do you square this up with passages like *Romans 4:16-25* and *Hebrews 11:8-19*?

NOW WHAT?

1. Have you made a decision to trust God? If not, what prevents you from doing so?
2. Next time you face an impossible situation, remember the one who gives life to the dead, and calls into being things that were not.