

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

Romans 4: 17a

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank God, it's time to read the Bible again. Let's continue to read Romans Chapter 4. We will read the first part of verse 17 today.

In Romans Chapter 4, Paul presents our father of faith, Abraham, as an example. He was first justified by God through faith, and later, through faith and by grace, he grew into God's heir, able to inherit the world God promised. Thus, every New Testament saint also begins with faith, receiving Christ's salvation through believing, being justified by God, and then continually receiving the supply of grace through faith to obtain the inheritance God promised. Since faith is so crucial, what exactly should we believe? Or, more precisely, what is the content of faith?

Verse 17 a: “(as it is written, ‘I have made you a father of many nations.’) He believed in God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did;”

Paul, with wisdom from God, describes Abraham's lifelong faith journey in two simple phrases: experiencing God as the One who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did.

Chapter 4 discusses justification by faith, and the first example given is straightforward: Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. The phrase “believed God” is too abstract, making it unclear how to follow. But if we lay out Abraham's lifelong footsteps as a picture, we can understand how Abraham believed God, especially seeing through his experiences how he encountered God as the One who calls things that do not exist into being and gives life to the dead.

God's promise to Abraham was clearly stated during His third appearance, focusing on descendants and land. The promise of descendants was fulfilled in Abraham's lifetime, while the promise of the land was fulfilled 500 years later in Moses' time. Thus, Paul focuses on the promise of descendants, stating that Abraham experienced God calling things that do not exist into being and giving life to the dead. Regarding descendants, calling things that do not exist into being refers to the birth of Isaac, and giving life to the dead refers to the offering of Isaac.

Let us temporarily leave Romans and return to Genesis to examine in detail the accounts of Isaac's birth and offering. The Old Testament is like a vivid, detailed painting that illustrates New Testament truth. As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. We will follow the chronological order, first looking at Isaac's birth, then his offering. Last week, we covered God's six appearances and words to Abraham. Today, we continue with the remaining four appearances and words.

Let's briefly review: God's first appearance was when Abraham was still in Ur of the Chaldeans, where the God of glory appeared, telling him to leave his country and family for the place God would show him. The second appearance was when Abraham was in Haran, where God told him to leave his country, family, and father's house, and Abraham crossed the Euphrates River, entering Canaan. The third appearance was at Abraham's first stop in the promised land, Shechem, where God promised him descendants and land. The fourth appearance came after Lot's departure, with God promising Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth. The fifth appearance was when God told Abraham that Eliezer would not inherit his estate; only one born from him could be his heir, and God foretold that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. Abraham believed God, and God accounted it to him for righteousness, marking the origin of justification by faith.

The sixth appearance came 13 years after Abraham had Ishmael through Hagar, the maidservant. God changed Abraham's name and established the covenant of circumcision, requiring him to cut off the flesh and leaving a mark as a confirmation of justification by faith. In God's first six appearances, we see God progressively

removing Abraham's dependencies—first Lot, then Eliezer, and finally Ishmael. Isaac's birth required the prior removal of human ideas and fleshly actions.

When Abraham was called to the promised land at 75, he had no son, which felt like having no support, making him uneasy. Seeking support through human effort was natural, as it is for all of us, but this is not God's way. Before the promised Isaac could be born, God needed to remove the supports Abraham sought for himself.

In Genesis 17, after God established the covenant of circumcision with Abraham, He told Abraham to change Sarai's name to Sarah, meaning "mother of nations," and promised that he would have a son through her. Abraham could not believe it; he fell on his face and laughed, saying in his heart, "I am 100 years old, and Sarah is 90, past childbearing age—how is this possible?" Thus, Abraham said to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!" meaning, "I already have a son, Ishmael." But God firmly told Abraham that Sarah would bear him a son, to be named Isaac. The name was given, and Isaac means "laughter," as God wanted Abraham to remember his unbelieving laughter.

God's seventh appearance to Abraham was as a friend, accepting his hospitality, recorded in Genesis 18. Abraham's knowledge of God deepened and broadened through his experiences. Initially, in Ur of the Chaldeans, he knew God as the God of glory. After rescuing Lot, through the priest Melchizedek's help, he knew God as the Most High God, Lord of heaven and earth. Later, during circumcision, he knew God as El Shaddai, the all-sufficient supplier. Now, he knew God as his friend, able to accept his hospitality, eat, drink, and laugh together like human friends.

When God visited Abraham in human form, Sarah busied herself preparing food, and Abraham served by God's side. God casually conversed with Abraham, announcing that Sarah would bear a son at the appointed time. Sarah, overhearing from behind the tent, laughed in her heart, saying, "My menstruation has stopped—how could I have this joy?" Sarah, too, could not believe. Her unbelief led to a humorous exchange between God and man, recorded in Genesis 18:12-15: "Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?' And the Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah

laugh, saying, “Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?” Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son.’ But Sarah denied it, saying, ‘I did not laugh,’ for she was afraid. And He said, ‘No, but you did laugh!’” Saints must read this carefully; this dialogue, like a playful exchange between old friends, is the most beautiful biblical record of God as man’s friend.

In Genesis 18, God, as a friend, told Abraham that Sodom’s sins were so grave it would face God’s judgment, leading to Abraham’s glorious intercession for his nephew Lot, which became a model for our intercession for others.

Genesis 20 records that Abraham moved with Sarah to Gerar in the south. Abraham again called Sarah his sister, and King Abimelech of Gerar took her into his palace. This was the second time Abraham betrayed Sarah, revealing a persistent weakness in his heart: he valued his own life, fearing that powerful men, attracted to Sarah’s beauty, would kill him. Both times he betrayed Sarah, God personally intervened to save her. God did not appear or speak to Abraham but spoke to King Abimelech, telling him Abraham was a prophet and that he must ask Abraham to intercede for him and his household, or their women would remain barren.

This was Abraham’s most shameful intercession. It was his own fault, yet others suffered; his own weakness, yet he had to intercede from a high position for others; his own wife had not yet borne a child, yet he had to pray for others’ wives and concubines to bear children. This was a shameful intercession, far more difficult than the glorious one before, but it was a necessary experience before Isaac’s birth.

After these experiences, Abraham and Sarah were prepared to welcome Isaac’s birth. Indeed, at God’s appointed time, when Abraham was 100, Sarah bore a son named Isaac, commemorating Abraham’s laughter and Sarah’s laughter. Thus, Sarah said God made her laugh, marking Abraham’s experience of God calling things that do not exist into being. In Abraham’s old age, with Sarah past childbearing, in a state of nothingness and impossibility, God made something out of nothing. Isaac’s birth brought God-given laughter.

God's eighth appearance to Abraham is recorded in Genesis 21:12, when Isaac was weaned, and Abraham held a feast to celebrate. During this joyful occasion, Sarah saw Ishmael mocking and bullying Isaac. She told Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael. Ishmael was likely nearly 20 years old, and Abraham was reluctant, distressed about Ishmael. God appeared to Abraham and spoke, as recorded in Genesis 21:12-13: "But God said to Abraham, 'Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called. Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he is your seed.'"

God told Abraham to listen to Sarah, meaning we must follow the leading of grace throughout our lives, as Sarah prefigures grace. Abraham then cast out Hagar and Ishmael. They lived in Beersheba for a time, where Abraham planted a tamarisk tree and called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. Their family of three, with many servants, lived in peace and joy, like today's church, where every saint can produce an Isaac, and the church is filled with living water and joyful life.

God's ninth appearance to Abraham is recorded in Genesis 22:1-2: "Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then He said, 'Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.'" This was the prelude to Abraham offering Isaac, a test from God. Abraham's faith had to be tested, showing that each of us on the path of faith will also face God's testing. 1 Peter 1:7 says: "that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Thus, testing has a positive purpose—to gain praise, honor, and glory.

At this point, Abraham's faith was mature, his life seasoned. Hearing God's command, he did not consult Sarah or consider that Isaac was his only son, with Ishmael already cast out. If Isaac died, and God's promises of descendants and land were tied to Isaac, how would they be fulfilled? Abraham didn't consider this. He had experienced God calling things that do not exist into being. How God would act,

he didn't know, but he trusted God's power and promises. How the promises would be fulfilled was God's matter; Abraham only needed to obey, leaving the rest to God.

So, Abraham took Isaac on a three-day journey to Mount Moriah, as God directed. He had Isaac carry the wood for the burnt offering, while he carried the fire and knife, and father and son went up the mountain together. Isaac, likely 16 or 17, was stronger than the aged Abraham. On the way, they conversed, and Isaac asked, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Clearly, Isaac had offered burnt offerings with Abraham many times and knew a lamb was needed. Abraham, unsure how to answer, said, "God will provide."

They reached the place God specified, built an altar, and laid the wood. Abraham bound Isaac on the altar. Isaac, a robust young man, could have escaped, but he was obedient, allowing Abraham to bind him. As Abraham raised the knife to kill Isaac, God appeared to him a tenth time, recorded in Genesis 22:11-12: "But the Angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' So he said, 'Here I am.' And He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.'"

God provided a ram to replace Isaac. After Abraham offered the burnt offering, God spoke to him again, recorded in Genesis 22:16-18: "and said: 'By Myself I have sworn,' says the Lord, 'because you have done this thing, and have not spared your son, your only son—blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.'"

Paul tells us in Galatians 3:16: "Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ." In the event of Abraham offering Isaac, Isaac prefigures Jesus Christ. Isaac carrying the wood corresponds to Jesus carrying His cross to Golgotha. Isaac bound on the altar prefigures Jesus willingly giving His life, obedient unto death.

From Abraham hearing God's command to offer Isaac, the three-day journey, and receiving Isaac back on the altar prefigures Christ's resurrection on the third day. Isaac was God's grace to Abraham, and after receiving this grace, Abraham offered it back to God.

In this event, Abraham truly experienced God giving life to the dead, showing that all our service must also be in the principle of death and resurrection. Since Isaac prefigures Christ, God promised Abraham's descendants would be like the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore, possessing their enemies' gate. As mentioned earlier, the stars prefigure New Testament saints, and the sand prefigures Abraham's physical descendants, the Jews. At Christ's return, victorious saints will reign with Him in heaven, and the restored Israel will lead the nations to worship God on earth. Abraham's descendants, whether heavenly or earthly, will possess the gate of their enemies.

According to Abraham's experience, he first experienced God as the One who calls things that do not exist into being (Isaac's birth) and then as the One who gives life to the dead (offering Isaac). But Paul says Abraham believed in God who gives life to the dead and calls things that do not exist as though they did, seemingly reversing the order. Paul does this for the sake of New Testament saints' experience. In our experience, we don't first experience resurrection, as before salvation, our spirit was dead, without eternal hope. The Holy Spirit regenerates us, giving us the experience of death and resurrection first. Then, throughout our life's journey, we experience God calling things that do not exist into being. In impossible situations, we still believe God, and He makes a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, calling things that do not exist into being, for our experience.

Let us pray together: Lord, thank You. You are the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that do not exist into being. In our lifelong journey of following You, like Abraham, our father of faith, we must go through every experience he did. Lord, as our father of faith walked his faith journey, though he was weak and failed, he persisted in faith in You. Help us follow Abraham's footsteps, especially when we are weak and fail, using his example to encourage us to lift our drooping hands and

feeble knees, continuing to walk the path of faith. Bless my daily life. I pray in the holy name of the Lord Jesus Christ.