



“What is Faith?”¹ **Romans 4:13-22**

A couple of months ago, I was standing in David’s office, talking with him about something. As we were talking, I used a certain word to describe something, and he said to me that he disagreed. We went back and forth for a little while, and I realized that the word I was using was confusing. Then I said something like, “Can I just look up this word in the dictionary for a moment?” When I went to the dictionary, David and I saw something that was pretty funny. Have you ever noticed in defining words, a dictionary will have a first definition and then maybe a second, third or fourth? Well, those definitions reveal that there’s different ways of using a word. And, in the situation between David and me, when I was using the word, I was using the primary definition of the word. And, when David was using the word, he was understanding it as the secondary definition.

You know what? While words matter, we also have to recognize definitions matter. I know there have been many times in my life where I’ve been angry, troubled and even wrongly set-at-ease because I’ve misunderstood what someone *meant* by what they said. And, in going through these scenarios, I’ve been challenged over and over again to sit back and listen and try to discern *what* something means by what someone is saying.

Now, we may all understand this when it comes to relationships with people, but sometimes I wonder if, when reading the Bible, we assume too much of ourselves. We think that we’ll automatically “get it” upon first reading. And, we might assume we know many basic things when reading the Scriptures without ever testing ourselves by saying, “Is this what this word or phrase really means?”

You might be thinking, “Why are you saying all of this?” Well, I’m saying this because the sermon’s title this morning is “What is faith?” And you could be thinking, “Why did I even come today? I know what faith is!” This topic seems so basic and so fundamental. And, it is. But it’s sometimes the most fundamental things that need to be addressed to see if we actually know what the Bible means when it’s using these words.

I think that confusion abounds regarding the word faith. Culturally there’s confusion. And, within the universal church, there’s confusion. Personally, I fear that many of us Christians have been caught up in a whirlwind of varying definitions of faith. And, as a result, many are confused, tired and maybe even tempted to give up in following Jesus. This morning, we need to go back to the Scriptures and ask God, “What do you mean when you say faith?” Thankfully, that’s exactly the question Paul answers in the verses we’re studying this morning from Romans 4. Here we see that **Faith depends on God and trusts his promises**. If you haven’t turned in your Bibles yet to Romans 4, please go there, and after I pray, we will read verses 13-22 together:

¹ This manuscript is still in the rough draft phase. I recommend you utilize these notes in conjunction to the sermon to gain greater insight and clarity.

¹³ For 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. ¹⁴ For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. ¹⁶ 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, ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” ¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. ²⁰ No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²² That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”²²

Paul takes a good amount of time to state what he means and define what he states. And, up to this point, Paul has emphasized that we are reconciled with God because of what Jesus has done for us. And the only way we can experience the blessings of salvation is not through anything we do, but only through faith! Through faith, we come to God, apart from all of our works. This is all a gift. So, it’s not that God declares us righteous because of faith *and* circumcision or faith and morality. It’s faith alone.

This is what we saw in last week’s sermon, and we also see this in verses 13-15 of this text. And, I actually want to treat these few verses as a segue way into verses 16-22. Think of it as a bridge from last week’s sermon to this week’s. Again, Paul is reiterating the importance of faith alone. So, he says that **God saves through faith alone because the law is insufficient to save (vv. 13-15)**. And so, in verse 13, he says that God made a promise to Abraham that wasn’t dependent on circumcision (or any works for that matter). Abraham didn’t have the Mosaic Law. How in the world could that law save him?! Instead, Abraham believed and God counted him as righteous for trusting God’s saving promise.

So, Paul says that if the adherents of the law are the only ones who are rescued by God, then faith is null and void. In other words, who cares about faith if God still has requirements for you to attain to. Now, some people could say, “No! Faith still matters even though God has laws you are to attain to.” Faiths like traditional Roman Catholicism or Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons would teach this. We have faith, but we also are to have our works which justify us. Paul says that if God works this way, faith is pointless. And he gives us a reason why in verse 15: ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. ³

First, apart from Jesus, the law only brings with it wrath. In other words, while it does show us God’s beautiful standard, it also highlights where we have failed. Ventura, I hope we all know this, but whenever we state any law or rule, it comes with condemnation because we have failed even the smallest of rules. You could nod your head to this, but let me press this. Some of you might define “rule”

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:13–22.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:15.

as legalism. That's not what I'm saying. I'm just saying anything that comes out as something we are to do. So, when people say, "In the Old Testament, God gave commands. In the New Testament, God just wants us to love!" Hold on, love is the sum of the Law! And the Bible says "Love is patient." And don't say we've done good enough. The Law doesn't communicate good enough. The Law says that if you disobey in one point, you've disobeyed it all. So, with the Law comes wrath.

So, Paul says that if it's faith and works, there's no point to faith because you get just as much condemnation with faith and works than if you just focus on your works. Then Paul goes on and says "where there is no law there is no transgression." What does that mean?! Does that mean that if someone doesn't know that something is wrong, then they're not culpable? No. In Romans 2, Paul already talks about people who do not have the law, but are still responsible. Paul is being very purposeful with his words, and we again have to remember the context of these words. Paul is pitting works against faith as a means to be saved. Then he uses this word "transgress." The word "transgress" refers to someone moving away from the standard. Within works, if you are not perfect, you transgress. But what about faith? Is there any transgression found within the principle of faith? Get this. If you have faith, there is no transgression found because faith doesn't focus on faith. Faith focuses on the object. You can have weak faith. You can have strong faith, but that's not the point of faith. Therefore, within faith, there is no *law of works* and therefore, there's no transgression. That's why a man could say "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief," and Jesus didn't say, "Go back until you find more faith!"

But people could listen to this and say, "I don't get what you're saying Paul!" At this point, Paul essentially is saying, "Let's go back to the dictionary and see how we're defining terms." And now he shows us the definition of faith by looking again at Abraham. But before he goes to the dictionary, he tells us why this is such an important question to answer. Look at verse 16 again: ¹⁶That 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,⁴

Three reasons why faith alone is so important. First reason: **because we must be saved by grace alone.** Remember that the sin of humanity is that we defame God and do not glorify him as God. All sin stems from suppressing his glory. Yet, God is the supreme Glory and deserves our praise. So, in rescuing human beings, he saves in such a way to reveal his glory. In saving by grace alone through faith alone, he shows he's the Savior, completely (and not us). Secondly, **faith alone is utterly important because it points us to God being the perfect Savior.** He alone saves and he alone keeps us. If our salvation depends on us at all, then God's promises are contingent on us. Do you want your salvation to depend at all on you and what you do? NO! Finally, **faith alone is so important because without it, we will not be reconciled with God.** In verse 16, he says that God's plan of rescue is given not only to the "adherents of the law," but also "to the one who shares the faith of Abraham." The wording here, based in the context, reveals that Paul is talking about Jews and Gentiles. Paul is not saying that the Jews who obey the Law are saved, and the Gentiles who have faith are saved. That would be contradicting what he said in verses 9-12. Verse 12 says he's the faith of those who are circumcised, who are not merely circumcised. He is also the father of the uncircumcised. In verse 16, Paul brings up we are the offspring of Abraham. Who's the offspring? All who have faith: those who have the Law who have faith and those who do not have the Law, but have faith, are the offspring of Abraham. Meaning, we have received God's salvation, too! So, Paul is saying Jews and Gentiles are saved through the same means: faith.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:16.

Then he presses this further: **if you don't share the same faith as Abraham, you are not counted righteous.** This doesn't mean that if you don't have the same strength or amount, but we're talking about the quality. We're talking about the definition of faith. If your faith is a worldly kind or even a faith that merges that of the world and the Bible, you're missing it.

Now we can see why it's so important to believe we're saved through faith alone. But we can also ask, "Well then, what does Paul mean when he uses the word faith?" This was an emphasis we saw in last week's sermon. But again, "what does Paul mean when he says faith?" I'm very grateful for this text. Eternal destiny, eternal reconciliation, hangs on the balances here in understanding what faith means. And in this text, Paul opens the dictionary of Abraham's story and highlights four aspects to biblical faith. So, **what is faith?** First we see that,

1. **Biblical faith depends on God (v. 17a).**

Read verse 17 with me again: ¹⁷as 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. ⁵

God promised that Abraham would be a father of many nations, not just Israel. That's the promise. Pretty spectacular, right? Paul adds that Abraham was in God's presence when he heard this promise and believed God. Paul actually says "in the presence of the God in whom he believed." Please get this point. While faith involves knowledge, it is first and foremost relational. I cannot tell you how much I heard people use the word "faith" as simply believing some information God says. They don't talk about their dependence on God, their weakness and their neediness for him, in and of himself.

So, for example, someone can say, "God says it. I believe it. End of the matter. I have faith!" You know, you can firmly believe something and not depend on it. You all can emphatically affirm that Kim Jong-Un is the ruler of North Korea, but that doesn't mean that you depend on him for your life. Abraham believed on God. The phrase means that Abraham didn't depend on himself. Abraham depended on God. So, faith isn't only knowing the facts.

This point is affirmed elsewhere in the Bible. Similar phrases for faith in the New Testament teach us this. We come up with phrases like: trust in, rely on, depend on, look to, turn to, rest in. We hear Jesus say, "Come to me." Since faith's object is Jesus, faith is relational. A person with faith falls at Jesus' feet and finds his arms carrying them. This reality of faith causes me to ask you this right now: **"Do you want God for God? And do you believe that only Jesus, who is pure grace, can rescue you so that you want him?"**

Faith is relational. Then Paul goes on in verse 17 and shows us that,

2. **Biblical faith knows God's character (v. 17b).**

Within this relationship, Paul adds another phrase at the end of verse 17. He says, "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." Why does Paul add this? Well, I believe it's because Paul is highlighting the character of God. I mean, God made a pretty spectacular and generally unbelievable claim. Abraham's going to be the father of many nations (and he's how old again)?!

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:17.

But Paul shows us that faith nestles itself in the character of God himself. And, in this promise, there are two things about God that solidified Abraham's faith. First, God gives life to the dead! God created Adam and Eve, and in the Eve story, God breathed his life into her so that she was alive. God is life and he is the giver of life. By the way, this word "dead" is brought up again in verse 19, referring to Sarah's womb. Yet, Abraham reasoned from God's character and ability.

So, God makes a promise, and then Abraham asks, "Can God do this? Yes! God can do anything. He can give life to the dead. Of course he can give life in a dead womb." Then Paul adds that God also "calls into existence the things that do not exist."⁶ There are not nations of the world that are yet in existence. The promised Messiah hasn't come yet. Sarah isn't even pregnant at this point. Yet, Abraham believes that none of this limits God. God has declared it, and whatever God declares will come to be. Again, look back at creation. The lack of time, space and matter didn't keep God from bringing everything into existence. He's the creator of it all.

When you know and believe the character of God, you are increasingly convinced he can do whatever he says he will do. By the way, Ventura, this means that in order to grow in faith, we need to study the Bible and what it says about him. In our western culture, much of Bible reading has been turned on its head. People study the Bible in order to find out more of how to make themselves better. And they treat God like a Divine Therapist. You go into his office. You hear his advice and then walk away. But the Bible is primarily meant to show you God! Do you know him? Do you know his character? He is the One we need – and we were created to know him!

But this is not the only component to faith. Paul also shows us that,

3. Biblical faith depends on God despite contrary feelings and appearances (vv. 18-20).

And depends despite contrary feelings and circumstances. Look at verses 18-19 with me again: ¹⁸In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." ¹⁹He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.⁷

"In hope he believed against hope." Faith involves an assurance, a confidence that God will do what he says. And so, even if circumstances seem to preach otherwise, faith says, "But God!" This reminds me of the hymnwriter who wrote, "Though darkness veils his lovely face, I rest on his unchanging grace." The storm clouds of life could roll in, but those clouds don't change the Sun's existence one bit. The sun is still there. The sun is still doing what it is intended to do. And, faith reminds us that above the clouds, the sun is shining brightly.

So, Abraham believed against hope. I mean, he could look at himself at 100 years old and say, "I'm almost dead! Is it even possible for my body to bring about a child? But even if it were possible for Abraham to bring about a child, what about Sarah? I mean, he's essentially thinking, "No offense, honey, but you're old!" All the circumstances point against the fact. Yet, he still had faith.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:17.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:18–19.

And Paul indicates that this faith included hope and conviction. After all, Paul writes in verse 19, “¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body. . . .²⁰ No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God. . . .”⁸ Here is where I think some preachers go too far with a definition of faith. They look at these verses and say, “Abraham never doubted God’s promise! Look. He did not weaken in faith! Christian, if you have any doubts, you have no faith.” I become angry with those types of sermons. Not because I don’t think our faith shouldn’t grow in assurance and conviction, but because 1) that’s not what Paul’s saying here, and 2) if you preach that, you harm people who have faith, but are weak in faith. And, the Bible says that a bruised reed, he will not break!

So, how can I be so confident this is *not* what Paul is saying. Well first, we have to go back to Genesis! Think about Abraham’s life and practice. Did Abraham *never* doubt again? No. Genesis 15, he’s counted righteous through faith in God’s promise. Genesis 16, he’s pursues Hagar to have a child. Was he trusting God in that action? No. He was reverting back to the old ways. So, what does Paul mean when he says that he did not weaken in faith? Or, “no unbelief made him waver.” Actually, verse 20 shows us that there was unbelief. I agree with two different commentators I read this past week. One by the name of Thomas Schreiner wrote that the tense of the verb Paul uses here indicates “the basic. . . direction of Abraham’s life. . .” (Schreiner, p. 238). Then, another man by the name of Timothy Keller boils this down nicely and says, **“Abraham did not always live out his faith, his obedience was not perfect, his trust fluctuated; but his faith was never extinguished. He hung on to God’s promises even in his own flaws and failings – and as he did so, he ‘was strengthened in his faith’ (Romans 4:20)”** (Keller, p. 106).

So, please hear me carefully. Faith is not a new law where we say, “Oh, you don’t have *this level* of assurance? Well then, sorry. No faith.” No. Remember, faith looks to Jesus. Faith’s object is God. And if someone is trusting Jesus as the One who reconciles them to God. If they know their works can never save and that even their desires need to be saved. If they recognize Jesus took the justice on their behalf on the cross. And even if they have a weak faith that believes Jesus rose from the dead. Then, through trusting him, they are brought to the loving arms of God.

What kindness of God. I don’t know why this is the case, but God loves a process. And he loves to grow us. And so, for you today, you might be thinking, “My faith is so weak. I doubt.” Don’t make a new law of transgression within faith. Instead, let Abraham’s story encourage you to look to God. Abraham’s story shows you that God takes us in our weakness and promises to, over time, grow us. He did it with Abraham. Even through Abraham’s failings, God grew Abraham in faith.

And how do we see this growth? Look at the end of verse 20: he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God.⁹ Faith is relational. Not only is God relating with us, but we are relating with him. And remember again, Paul said the sin which leads to all sins is that we do not glory in God. But through faith, we begin to praise God, savoring him and who he is and what he does! Over time, through difficulties and joys, God reveals more of himself. And, over time, through the eyes of faith, while we do not understand, we praise him for all he’s done because we know him. We know his character. We know what he can do. So, we trust and praise. And through praising, we confront our own faithlessness. And even in this, God grows us.

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:19, 20.

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:20.

So, we have seen that biblical faith depends on God (contrary to feelings and appearances) and faith knows the character of God. Finally, we see that,

4. Biblical faith trusts God's promises (v. 21).

Read verse 21 with me: ²¹fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.¹⁰ Biblically speaking, authors would use phrases like “fully convinced” not to state perfection, but to state trajectory. Faith isn't extinguished. Like a baby clinging to mom could lose his grip, his grip doesn't make him secure. His mom's hold does. And so with us. Even if our grip loosens, there's still trust. And that trust communicates a conviction that only God can carry.

But right now, I want to focus on the phrase “that God was able to do what he had promised.” This past week, I had a conversation with another church member, asking them what their idea was of faith. And they essentially said that it seems sometimes that faith is strongly believing that God's going to do something. So, they even used Abraham's scenario as an example. Abraham believed God to do the impossible, and so they related it to a difficult circumstance in their past and said, “they believed God would work in that circumstance.” But as they were saying that, there was confusion in their own mind. I then said, “What's interesting is that Paul says that faith is trusting God and his *promises*.” And I went on to say that God doesn't promise that if you believe hard enough, he's going to give you anything you want. This person said, “Well, what about the faith to move mountains?”

And I think that's a great question. I've also heard people say, “But Jesus says ‘ask whatever you want in my name.’” The misapplication of these verses saddens me because in the long run, it burdens and deceives people. When I read about the faith to move mountains, the emphasis isn't on the mountains. The emphasis is on faith. The point of that passage is not that your faith can change any insurmountable odd. The point is that through dependence on God and his promises, any mountain that would keep you from glorifying him will be moved.

I think that's the idea of praying anything in Jesus' name. It's so sad to me how people take “in Jesus' name,” and turn it into a genie's lamp. Because we pray in Jesus' name, he can declare that something will happen? This is a misunderstanding of the phrase “in Jesus' name.” To pray in Jesus' name means to be on the basis of and for the glory of Jesus!

Simply believing something hard enough doesn't mean you're going to get it. The apostle James even communicates this. He tells us that we can pray for something emphatically and not get it because we ask amiss. Meaning, we're misunderstanding God and his ways. We're not praying in accordance with God's promises. We're praying in accordance with what we think God's promises should mean.

So, I've heard people say before, “I've been praying for this thing and I've really believed God's going to give this to me, but he hasn't!” And they think that's praying in faith. Then someone says, “Well, you didn't believe enough.” How horrible. The emphasis then turns back to us and how strong we are. It's a new law for us to obey.

Now you could say, “Well, then what is faith then?” Faith is relational. It's depending on God and his promises. It knows his character, and seeks to pray in accordance with who he is. So, let me give you a personal example. I am about a week away from my first anniversary with chronic pain. When I first got

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:21.

it, I thought there'd be a solution coming soon. I don't even think I prayed much about it. I worked, I went to the doctor. It'll be fine. Over time, I went to physical therapy. Didn't get better. Got an X-ray. Went to an orthopedic doctor. Got an MRI. Still a mystery. Tried all different sorts of alternative methods. Still didn't work. And not only that, new pains came about over time. It's difficult to stand. It's difficult to move at times. Some days are better than others, but even laying down has involved more pain recently.

I've heard some people say that this is simply an attack of Satan. Well, maybe. But does that mean God's not a part of this at all? No. Paul said a messenger of Satan came to him and yet God was over it all and worked in it to actually reveal more of his strength through Paul's weakness. This is similar with Job.

But if I wanted to cherry pick Bible verses and say, "God says that Jesus is the healer," I'm going to claim that for me, I could do that. But I'd be taking the promises right out of context. No matter how much I'd like for them to mean that, those promises don't mean that. This, by the way, states a very important truth, Ventura. If you are depending on God and his promises, that means you are looking to God as your supreme hope. Faith confesses he's the One you need. Then in trusting his promises, you have to ensure that you know the context of his promises. Some of you could say, "But I have Bible verses that say this or that. Why know the context?" Well, Satan's temptation of Jesus in the wilderness was all Bible verses. Context matters!

Another good test to know if you're praying in faith in God's promises is to ask yourself if you are emphasizing God's glory, power, and majesty. If praying in faith, for you, means polishing up your faith and showing God how strong your faith is, then you've turned faith into a new law and you're not praying in faith. You're praying in your name and your power because praying in faith means praying in complete dependence on God and whatever he says he will do.

When I talked with this church member this past week, they said, "Wow, I think I've focused more on the mountains to move than focusing on faith in God. I think many of us do that. I've been learning that through praying and study of the Word, God will increase my ability to see what he actually promises. And, in some ways, that's hard. In other ways, it's glorious! It's taken almost a year for me to finally come to a point to admit, confess and even rejoice in God if this pain is to be the rest of my life. Of course, I don't know if this will be the rest of my life. But faith has summoned me to trust God and seek to pray in accordance with His glory. I don't know if it will be for his glory for me to be healed completely. I would like to think so. But it may not be. And, am I ok with that?"

And you could say, "Well, what's the point of faith if I don't move the mountains I want to move?!" And there, our hearts are revealed. In this text, Paul shows us that faith leads us to praise God. Hear this. Praise and Faith are not the same. But faith leads to praise. Which means faith is the instrument God uses to lead us to glory in God above all else. This doesn't mean that life's all easy. Trust includes lamenting at his feet (laying our burdens down). It also includes rejoicing at his throne and glorying in Him supremely. And so my prayers have even been shaped over the last year. I don't stop praying for healing, but I submit to his sovereign will. I don't presume that physical healing is the mountain he wants to move. The greatest mountain to move is the mountain of my sinful pride that wants to elevate me and then keep me from seeing and savoring Jesus.

Through this past year, I have begun to see more of his kindness than I did before. This doesn't mean that my faith doesn't waver. But I've even see God increase my faith through I've wavered. I share this not to boast in me. But instead to boast in God and to help you to see what faith does. Faith doesn't just

say, “Well, God can do anything. He can save this person and will. Or, God can and will bind the devil here. Or, ‘I pray in Jesus’ name to do this; therefore, he will.’” Faith trusts in the actual promises as God gives them because faith depends on God. And, here in this passage, Paul emphasizes that Abraham’s story of faith shows us that God declares righteous through dependence on God and his promises.

Do you depend on Jesus for salvation? He has done it all to reconcile you to God. No matter your past sins. No matter your weakness. He came to save! But not only that, this text tells us that God also frees us and grows us so that we glory in him! So, through faith, we’re brought to God. Through faith, we praise and worship Him! And so, Paul writes in verse 22: ²² That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”¹¹

Abraham was counted righteous because faith emphasizes God and his sole ability to save. Because faith trusts God, along with the promises *he* makes (not the ones we think he could or should make), even faith is not a work worthy of being counted righteous. Salvation is all of grace, and this grace sets us free to trust Jesus and glory in God. Praise God for this gift.

Do you share the faith of Abraham?

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¹¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:22.