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<sup>20</sup> Abraham did not waver in unbelief at God's promise but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, <sup>21</sup> because he was fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. <sup>22</sup> Therefore, it was credited to him for righteousness. <sup>23</sup> Now it was credited to him was not written for Abraham alone, <sup>24</sup> but also for us. It will be credited to us who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. <sup>25</sup> He was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. Romans 4:20-25 (HCSB)

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Our world is full of 'promises'. You open up the mail and you receive all sorts of offers. Some book companies begin by saying, 'You have won a million dollars' (but then you have to read all the 'small print'. All sorts of credit card companies write, promising to save money. Products advertised on TV promise to make a difference to your life.

In our church buildings we also hear many people make all sorts of promises: parents and godparents; confirmees; people getting married; and all sorts of people in all sorts of ways.

Although there is a saying 'Promises are made to be broken', this defies the true meaning of 'promise'. Promises are something you are meant to keep. Of course, there are times when we just can't keep our promise. Perhaps those promises were foolishly made. Perhaps not enough thought went into them. Perhaps words were quickly spoken in order to get rid of someone.

So often as human beings we make promises that we struggle to keep. In most of these cases the promises were made with good intentions. But the reality of life (and the choices we sometimes make) radically alter the course of many promises.

The effect of broken promises can, at times, be devastating. When couples who are married no longer keep these promises, families are shattered. When godparents and parents do not keep the promises made at baptism, so often God's children struggle to know and live the faith. And when promises in daily life are not kept, we become less trusting and more cynical. Sadly, we often wonder what will happen to people when so many promises made are not fulfilled...

In our Scripture Reading this day we hear of the promises of God: and it is ultimately the promise of salvation. God said to Abram that he would have many descendants. And God says to us that we will be saved by His grace, through faith.

The promise of God is sure, and it received through faith. However, at this point we need to understand what this 'faith' really is. When it comes to understanding what this 'faith' is, we so often refer to our world of human experience (and the decisions and promises we make) to understand what it means 'to be saved by faith'. But such an approach (understanding 'faith' in terms of a human decision to make a 'promise for Jesus') is flawed.

There is an interesting variation between different Bible translations of Romans 4:13. The more contemporary translations translate one Greek word (*nomos* – 'Law') with a phrase ('obeying the Law'). But the more traditional (and more accurate translations) simply speak about how we do not receive God's promise on the basis of the Law (rather than on the basis 'obedience to the Law').

This may seem like splitting hairs over one word, but there is a very important difference here. When we start translating one word in Greek ('the Law') with a phrase ('*obedience* to the Law') we then will see 'the Law' in essentially moral terms (that is, doing what is right and wrong). In this situation, then, 'the Law' essentially involves human will. It is essentially seen as something you are meant to 'do' or 'keep'.

But without the word 'obedience' (which does not appear in the Greek) the phrase 'the Law' points to something more. The Law then is seen as something more. It is the divine and holy power that exists in an 'absolute' sense in our universe – even when we do not think about it or 'keep it' (that is, 'obey it').

This, then, has some practical implications for understanding what faith is. For in the Bible Reading today from Romans 'faith' stands in contrast to 'the Law'.

Therefore, if you understand 'the Law' essentially in terms of something you have to 'do' or 'keep' (how 'good' you are at keeping promises, and the ability to make right and proper decisions), then faith will also be seen as something you 'do' (that is, a decision you make for Jesus). This, then, turns 'faith' into a human act or 'work' that must be done. Gone away, then, is the phrase 'saved by grace'.

But 'the promise' expressed in Romans 4 concerns not the promises we make to God, but the promises He makes to us. And faith is simply living in the light of the promise of God in Christ Jesus.

What does God demand of us? Jesus often answered the question in much the same way as it gets answered today. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbour as yourself." Of course, Jesus ran a 'law answer' by people so as to undermine their self-righteousness. Who alive can love like that? The answer is 'no one'.

In our lives we make many promises. Many of these we will keep. But we also experience 'broken promises'. Sometimes these 'broken promises' hurt a great deal. And if we rest in our promises alone, the hurt remains.

Sometimes we may hear people ask: 'How do you know that you are 'saved'?' People may answer: "I know that I am saved *because I believe* in Jesus.' But this is not a good answer, for it turns faith itself into a subjective thing, and a human work. How do I know that I am saved? I am saved because of Jesus. In spite of how I feel (and the promises I make or break) Jesus always remains the same. This season of Lent is a call to refocus on the person and work of Jesus. God has made a great promise to you in Jesus. In baptism God says, 'You are now heirs of Abraham. You are My children by My grace. So live by faith. Trust in Me.'

Abraham had every human reason to doubt the promises of God. God said to him at the age of 99 that he and Sarah (his very old wife) would have an heir. It seemed beyond human belief. But now the descendants of Abraham are all around the world.

God has also made a promise to us in Jesus. Jesus said He would be with us in every circumstance of life. ("I am with you always." Jesus said). Jesus said He would deal with our sins. ("The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and give His life as a ransom for many"). Jesus said we shall live forever. ("I go to prepare a place for you. And when I come back, I shall to you to be with Me so that you may be where I am.").

We remember that call of Jesus to "Take up the cross and follow Him." But this is not a 'law' statement'. It is Gospel. When we rest in God's great promise of salvation in Christ Jesus, we experience true freedom, hope, peace, joy, and life. No barrier is high enough, and no circumstance powerful enough to overrule the promise of God in Christ Jesus. Living our lives in light of the promises of God lifts our lives to new heights. God is with you always. This is His sure promise in Christ Jesus. Amen.