

Lenten roadmap: Romans 4:13-25

We are reading Romans 4 with the eyes of believers on a Lenten journey. There is a time for debate over law and gospel, works and grace—but not now.

by [Fred Craddock](#) in the [March 8, 2003](#) issue

The life situation of the reader of a text provides a lens through which that text is read. Or, to change the metaphor, the life situation provides the magnet, which draws from a text that which most clearly addresses the reader. For the same reader the same text may, under different circumstances, console or correct or convict or enlighten or inspire. If this is true of one reader, then certainly a nursing home resident and a teenager at camp do not read the same way. This observation is neither an endorsement of total relativity nor a reduction of the text to an inkblot test. (What do you see? I see an elephant. I see an airplane.) Rather, it is to recognize how the Bible functions as scripture; that is, how it speaks an appropriate word. As a document of the past, the text is at home in the hands of historians. As the scripture of the church, the text is at home in the inquiring faith of believers.

We are reading Romans 4:13-25 with the eyes of believers on a Lenten journey to Jerusalem. By a Lenten journey we mean a time of reflection, repentance and preparation for arrival at Good Friday and Easter. Under other circumstances this text might revive in us the debate over law and gospel, works and grace. There is a proper time and place for that, but not now. Now we are instructed and nourished by the striking affirmation about “the God in whom he [Abraham] believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” This statement reminds us that God is both the subject and the object of faith. As the subject of faith, God initiates faith. God called Abraham; God promised Abraham. Here faith begins and is sustained. And the one who believes is responding to and trusting in the God who calls and promises.

How refreshing to speak of and think of God! In the church we often hear of Christ and the Holy Spirit, but we only sometimes hear of God. Of course, Christ and the Holy Spirit are appropriate and essential subjects in Christian worship, preaching and teaching, but *God* sent the Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. All things, says Paul, are from God, through God and to God (Rom. 11:36). “Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied,” says Philip on behalf of the whole human race (John 14:8). Many churches seem to assume that everyone already believes in God and that what we need is the addition of Christ. Not so. “Do you believe in God?” is the appropriate first question.

Romans 4:17 not only instructs us but also nourishes us by its characterization of God as one “who gives life to the dead.” The additional expression, “and calls into existence the things that do not exist,” is not intended as a lead-in to another line of thinking. Paul is not entering into the debate about whether creation is out of nothing rather than out of some primordial mass. Rather, Paul is affirming that God gives life to the dead in the sense that God gives life and being where there were none before (see verses 18-25).

The God who gives life to the dead is revealed in the stories of certain people. Abraham and Sarah: they were barren and far past childbearing years. In this respect they were “dead,” and yet God had promised Abraham descendants in multitudes. Abraham hoped in the face of hopelessness. He was “fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised,” and held on tenaciously to the creed behind all creeds: “Nothing is impossible with God.” And Abraham’s faith was rewarded: all who trust in God, both Jew and gentile, are children of Abraham. God, indeed, gave life to the dead.

Jesus Christ: Jesus was dead, no question about that. Ask the soldiers, the Galilean women who followed him to Golgotha, Mary his mother. For some, of course, that death was too much to accept, too final, too contrary to hopes stirred. Desperation spun theories: Simon of Cyrene who bore the cross for him was crucified by mistake. A potion given to Jesus on the cross sent him into a deathlike slumber. His immortal soul ascended above the cross, leaving behind a corpse that was no longer Jesus. The theories are endless. But the church would have none of it: “He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.” On the third day, God gave life to the dead.

The believer: buried in the phrases “trespasses” and “our justification” is the drama of the death and resurrection not only of Christ but also of the believer. Paul seems not to favor the image of “born again” but prefers instead to speak of coming to faith as being made alive. “Even when we were dead through our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him” (Eph. 2:5-6). Paul applied such thinking to baptism: death, burial and resurrection with Christ (Rom. 6:3-4). God’s act in Abraham, and in Jesus Christ, is brought home as an unfailing reality in the believer: God gives life to the dead.

For the one who believes in the God who gives life to the dead, the Lenten journey is not only to Good Friday and Easter, but is also a revisiting of one’s own experience. Belief in this intersection of theology, Christology, and experience makes the traveler through Lent a pilgrim. Without this faith one is simply a tourist. Bring your camera; there may be camels.