

Romans

#11: God Loves to Play Against a Stacked Deck

Romans 4:18-25

Dr. Jeremiah Ebeling ---- October 26, 2025

Well, today we are going to see a truth about God's character that can change how you hope. We're going to see something about God's personality, even, that can transform the way you wait. It can alter the way that you pray and the things that you bring to Him—the people that you bring before Him in prayer. We're going to see a reality about how God likes to work in our lives that has the potential to completely upend the way that we ask for and expect and seek for God to show up in our lives. And our passage in Romans this morning offers this perspective-changing view into the way that God interacts with us as His people. That's where we're headed today. That's what we're going to be discovering in our Romans passage today.

We're already in the eleventh week of our Romans series, and Paul has just recently zeroed in on Abraham as the father of our faith, as the prototype of what real faith, what a life of faith, looks like. And in our passage today we're going to see this truth about God's character, about His personality, that showed in Abraham's life, that shows up in our salvation stories. And it will show up throughout our lives. And it changes the way you hope and the way you pray.

Romans 4:18-10

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.

So, let's see what that truth about God is. Why don't you go ahead and open your Romans journals. Open your Bibles. We're going to be in Romans chapter 4. And we're going to start in verses 18 and 19, if you guys would go there with me. This is what Paul the Apostle says:

“In hope he”—that’s Abraham—“believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ 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.”

What you can see Paul doing here is continuing to look back 2,500 years from when he writes this at the life of Abraham. Genesis 12 is where God first shows up in Abraham’s life. And He starts this completely new work with humanity. He’s going to use this one man to affect, to transform, all people, all men and women and children. He’s going to do that through Abraham. In Genesis 12 God makes three promises to Abraham. He says, “I’m going to give you land, blessing, and a seed.”

I’m going to give you the land of Canaan. I’m going to be a blessing in your life. I’m going to bless you so that you can bless all people. And then, Paul really wants to talk about this third promise—a seed, a son. God promises a son to Abraham, through whom God would make Abraham a great nation; that Abraham would become so much more than just he and Sarah.

And it’s interesting—when you read Genesis 12, after God makes this promise to Abraham, the narrator makes this side comment that is no side comment at all. He says that at the time of this promise Abraham was 75 years old. Later in the passage we find out that Sarah is 65 years old. We hear that, and we’re supposed to be thinking what the original hearers thought. And that is, *Wow, that’s an outlandish promise to make to two people well beyond their childbearing years. Really, God? Is that really what You’re going to do?* Indeed, that’s what God planned to do.

And so, Abraham turns seventy-five years and nine months and there’s no son. There’s no child. There’s no Isaac. The nursery was ready. It had been decked out long ago. It had the rocker and the changing table and the crib, and it was ready. Everything that was needed was there—except for the child. No Isaac yet. Well, surely the next year that would be different. It wasn’t, though. The year after that no different ... five years went by ... ten years went by ... and that nursery had just become a storage room now. I mean, the boxes were stacked to the ceiling a decade later.

In Genesis 15 Abraham is eighty-six. It’s eleven years later. God comes to him again and reaffirms the promise. He says, “You’re going to have a son. I promise you. You have my word. It’s coming. It’s going to happen.” He takes Abraham outside to do some stargazing and says,

“Abraham, look up. Look up at the sky. Count those stars if you can.” And then He says what Paul quotes here in verse 18: **“So shall your offspring be”**—just as though stars in the sky.

God re-ups on this promise to Abraham. So, nine months later, still no sons. Still no Isaac. Time drags on. It’s another thirteen years, and Abraham is almost one hundred, Sarah is almost ninety, and they are still just a family of two.

Well, I asked ChatGPT, “What are the chances of a 100-year-old man and a 90-year-old woman having a child together? Chat GPT said, “That is the dumbest question I ever heard.” I think I heard it laugh at me. And then it said this: “The chances are zero. It is biologically and medically impossible.” You’ll never find a nursery in a nursing home. It doesn’t happen. These two are not having a child together. It’s too late.

Well, Abraham turns one hundred, Sarah turns ninety, and miracle of miracles—the little one is born. Isaac is here—the promised son, the promised seed. And God does it. He comes through on His promise.

But stop and think about it. *God, why did You do it this way? Why this excruciatingly long wait?* I mean, He could have come to Abraham at age thirty-five and Abraham has a son at age thirty-six. He could have done it that way. It doesn’t change anything about the promises, right? So, why does God do it this way? Why does He come to Abraham at age seventy-five, and then a quarter of a century later, Abraham is having this promised son? Why that way? I think God is telling us something about Himself. There’s a truth about His character, and I’d say, even His personality, that He’s showing us. And that is this:

God loves to play against a stacked deck. God is showing us that He likes to work against all odds. He especially enjoys it when He shows up in the impossible—the things where we say, *No way, no how, it’s not happening*. And it’s just true about how God often likes to fulfill His promises in our lives.

God loves to play against a stacked deck ... in Abraham’s life

I mean, let’s look at our passage again. Paul is overemphasizing the stacked deck, the impossible odds that God is up against. And you can see it in this passage. Paul writes, **“In hope he [Abraham] believed against hope ...”** This is a hopeless situation! He is hoping against hope. It’s crazy! **“... that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told,**

‘So shall your offspring be.’ Abraham 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). Abraham, how are you still living? Paul is saying, *This man has one foot in the grave.* “ **... or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb.**” This word for “barrenness”—other translations will use the word “deadness.” The NASB and the NIV and other translations will use the phrase **“the deadness of Sarah’s womb.”** Why? Because the Greek word here doesn’t just mean childless, no children. The actual Greek word is “necrosis.” Recognize that word? It means “dead”—like *dead*-dead. Her womb is not just inhospitable; it’s impossible that it would make room for a son, for Isaac. And Paul is emphasizing this fact, that there is no way. This deck is so stacked against God, there’s no way that He can come through on this promise. And yet, He does.

You see, when it’s all but hopeless, when there’s little to no chance, when it seems impossible, this is how Christian hope can respond. I will quote the classic film *Dumb and Dumber* and Lloyd Christmas in saying that Christian hope can say, “So, you’re telling me that there’s a chance!”

You can hope against hope. So, you’re telling me there’s a chance ... when there’s no hope, when it’s impossible. Yeah. God likes to show up in those situations. He likes to play against a stacked deck. This is who He is. He likes to play against all odds. He likes to show up and work in the impossible. This is just part of His character. It’s part of His personality, I would say.

So, how does Abraham respond? What does he do in response to God’s promise that he would have a son and become the father of many nations, even when he’s childless? Look at all the words and the phrases that Paul will use to emphasize Abraham’s response in verses 18 through 21. Look at all the words that Paul is going to use here.

Romans 4:18-21

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.

“In hope Abraham believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ He did not weaken in faith”—look at that—“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 deadness of Sarah’s womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced”—look at all those words Paul is using—“that God was able to do what He had promised.”

How did Abraham respond to God’s promise given in Genesis 12 and reaffirmed in Genesis 15? He responded with belief. Abraham believed. No, he believed-believed. He believed God. He believed this promise.

But let me call a quick timeout here. Let’s just pause for a second. I don’t know—maybe you’re like me. When I first read verses 18 through 21 recently as I was studying it, my initial thought was, *Are we talking about the same Abraham?* I mean, he had amazing moments, no doubt. We just talked about a couple of expressions of that. But at the same time, Abraham, even when he did believe, God counts that faith as righteousness. And at the same time, what you see in Abraham are these dismal moments of unbelief, of doubt, of sin. You see examples of that in Abraham’s life as well. You see these places where he didn’t believe, where he did weaken in his faith, where unbelief did make him waver. He grew weak in his faith. He wasn’t fully convinced. You see several expressions in his life of this other experience of faith where he’s more faithless than anything else.

I'll put this up on the screen. *[Draws a squiggly line with several "mountains" and "valleys."]* I want you to think about the ups and downs of Abraham's faith journey in Genesis. We're going to be looking specifically in the Book of Genesis. And what you see in Abraham's life is this: you see that he has these incredible highs and some incredibly discouraging lows in his walk with the Lord. Let's just look at some examples.

In the first part of chapter 12, God comes to Abraham. Abraham has never met God before. God says to Abraham, "I want you to go to the land I will show you." What does Abraham do? He packs up his family and belongings, and he goes, not even knowing where he's headed. He follows the Lord. Wow! What a start! It's amazing.

In the second half of chapter 12, what happens? Abraham sends Sarah, his wife, into Pharaoh's palace and tells her to lie. *Hey, tell them that you're my sister. You're a beautiful woman. He's going to know that and he's going to come back for me when he finds out I'm married to you. So, lie to him and tell him that you're my sister.* He puts her life at risk to save his own skin, despite God's promise to him. He puts Sarah's life at risk. Not as impressive. Not awesome faith, right?

Then you look at chapter 15. God comes back to Abraham and reaffirms the promise of a son, the one He's promised. *He's coming, trust me.* And what does Abraham do? Abraham believes. He says, *Amen. I put my faith in that promise from you.* He says that to the Lord. This is actually where Abraham experiences saving faith, where he is justified, that word that we've been looking at for several weeks now.

Well, let's look at the very next chapter, chapter 16. Sarah says to Abraham, "God won't give me children. God won't let me have children. So, Abraham, here—here's my servant Hagar. Why don't you have a baby with her and that will be the child that God promised us?" Now, listen, Sarah meant every word of it. But it was also kind of a test, don't you think? Well, Abraham did not pass that test. And then there are years and decades of relational turmoil, pain, conflict because of that decision, that faithless decision. Well, what about the next chapter?

In chapter 17 God comes to Abraham and gives him the sign of circumcision. What does Abraham do? He obeys. Wow. Amazing faith ... and incredible pain tolerance, I would add too. Pretty impressive.

A few chapters later in chapter 20, man, it's a different king in a different palace, same sin. Abraham sends Sarah back into another king's palace and says, "Go ahead and lie, say you're my sister, you know the whole deal." *Abraham, did you not learn?* He did not learn.

Chapter 22—this is the final exam. God comes to Abraham and he says, "Abraham, I want you to take your son, your only son, the son that you love, Isaac, the one I promised you. I want you to take him and go to a mountain that I will show you, and I want you to offer him as a sacrifice on that mountain." And the text says that early the next morning Abraham gets up and takes Isaac. He does just as the Lord says. He reasons, we find out later, that God is going to have to get himself out of this somehow, because He promised this son. *Maybe He'll raise him from the dead.* He created that thought in his head—*This is how God's going to do it. This is how He's going to come through, even with this command He's given me.* At the last moment God calls him off and provides a ram instead. But man, what an incredible chapter, what incredible faith from this man.

But what you see in his life is this roller coaster of faith, right? That's what it is. You see these incredible mountain peak highs and these dark valley lows in Abraham's faith journey with the Lord. And you see that show up several times. And he's got amazing belief, and it's followed by this costly, devastating doubt. You see, Abraham faltered. He wavered. He doubted. He sinned. And each time he fell down he got back up, and he just kept walking in faith.

My question for you, though, is: Does anybody else look at this and think, *Yeah, that's my faith journey too.* Because that's what I think when I look at this. That is the experience of walking in faith—these incredible highs and these so low and painful lows. And what do you do when you fall? You do what Abraham did. You get back up. See, Abraham is the father of faith, but he's also the father of faltering and wavering and doubting and sinning. Yeah, he did all those things. So, the encouragement to us is to not be discouraged when you see this pattern in your life. You're on a well-worn path. Your father Abraham, the father of faith, is also the father of faltering and wavering and doubting and sinning. So, when you fall in faith, when you act in faithlessness, when you waver, falter, doubt, what do you do? You do what Abraham did. You get back up, you look to God and the promises that He has made to you. And with the Spirit's help you start walking again. And you continue to walk and follow the Lord and enjoy that. Because this is true about faith: faith is not about perfection. Faith is about direction. Faith is not about perfection. We aren't saved through perfect faith; we're saved by the death and

resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen? Yeah. And so, the Lord knows this about us too. He knows it's about progress. He knows that we're going to fall. He knows that we're going to waver and doubt. He knows we're going to sin. He's not surprised by that. What He calls us to do is to continue to progress, to get back up with His help. And He'll help us continue to walk in that faith.

That was a little detour, because I think it's important for us to see. But let's get back to the pivotal point that Paul is making in these verses, 18 through 21. What is he saying? He's saying that when God made his very specific promise to Abraham, which was re-upped in Genesis 15, Abraham believed. And when Abraham believed, when he put his faith in God and in that promise, when Abraham said "Amen" as we looked at last week, then it was "counted to him as righteousness." God did that. God came through on that promise.

Romans 4:22

...his faith was counted to him as righteousness.

In that very next moment, his faith was counted to him as righteousness. That's what Scripture says in verse 22 of Romans 4. **"His faith was counted to him as righteousness."** That's what happened in Abraham's life. In that very moment when Abraham chose to believe God and that He would come through on His promise, even against all odds, when the deck was stacked against Him, when it looked impossible, God justifies Abraham. God counts righteousness to him and removes his sin and gives him righteousness. And Abraham is saved.

But this is not just some history lesson in faith. This is our story too—that we're justified, we're declared righteous, that we are saved when we believe the very specific promises of God. So, look at the next passage, verses 23 through 25.

Romans 4:23-25

But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone,²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in Him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

“But the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in Him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”

So, same thing—when we choose to believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, when we choose to believe in Him, in that very moment what God does is that He takes Jesus’ spiritual résumé, His perfect life, His death for our sins, His being raised to life again to prove that it went through, that we are indeed justified. God takes that spiritual résumé, and He hits “select all.” And He copies it and He comes over to our spiritual résumé and He pastes. And our spiritual résumé is what Jesus’s is. It’s an exact copy.

And it may not feel like it. It may feel faker or phonier than anything George Santos has ever put on a résumé. But God says it’s true. He says it’s true. He says that our spiritual résumé is what Jesus’ spiritual résumé is. He deletes our sin, He removes it, He remembers it no more. And what He sees in us is the righteousness—not our righteousness—the righteousness of Christ in us. That’s what happens. That’s what happens in salvation.

So, I wonder, as you sit here this morning and you read these words, have you made that choice? Have you made the decision? Have you chosen to believe? Have you said “Amen” to the promise of God, that He who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification, that He is true, that He is real, that He is right when He says that? Because look, this is it. This is the gospel. It’s this reality that we believe and that we put our faith in. We shift our weight from relying on ourselves to relying fully on Jesus for our salvation. It’s believing in Him, God the Father who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord with the Spirit’s help, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. Have you made that choice?

If you haven't, you can do that right now. You can do that this morning, and say, "God, I believe that, just like Abraham did. I believe that promise that Jesus' spiritual résumé could indeed be mine." And if you make that choice—when you make that choice—in that very moment you're justified. Jesus' righteousness is counted as yours. His spiritual résumé magically, miraculously becomes yours. That's God's promise to us.

It's not a process. It's not after you have proven yourself worthy. That's not how it works. It's in that very moment that you choose to believe. You're declared righteous. It's not after proving that you won't falter or waver or doubt. Because you're going to do all those things. But you'll have the Holy Spirit within you who will help you to stand back up and keep walking in faith.

God loves to play against a stacked deck ...in our salvation

Now I want you to look at how God works in a similar way in our salvation as He did in Abraham's life and salvation. I want you to see that God loves to play against a stacked deck in our salvation too. He does—against all odds, when it seems impossible.

Just think about it—in other places in Romans and in Ephesians Paul talks about the state of our hearts before we're a child of God, before we're saved. And the word that he uses, and uses regularly, to describe our hearts is the same word that he uses for Abraham's body and Sarah's womb. Our hearts are dead, like necrosis dead—dead-dead. No hope. No chance. It's impossible. We were enemies of God. We were hostile towards Him. We turned our backs on Him. We hated Him. This is how Paul describes the state of our hearts before becoming believers.

So, Jesus came on a rescue mission for us. But we didn't think we were lost, and we definitely didn't want to be found. In fact, we told Him to get lost. We gave Him the middle finger. We said, *No thank you. Get away.* We turned our backs on Him.

And how did God respond as He came on this rescue mission for us? He said, *Fine, I'm done with you too.* No, He didn't say that. He kept coming. He kept pursuing us. Day and night, the mission never stopped until, miracle of miracles, He breaks through a hard, deadened heart and brings life from death. That's our salvation story. That's what happens in every one of our lives when we become believers. It's this righteousness of Jesus given to us. His spiritual résumé written onto ours, our sin taken away.

God loves to play against a stacked deck ... throughout our lives

But there's something more that I want you to see—one more thing. That's that God loves to play against a stacked deck throughout our lives. Throughout our walk with Him, our faith journey with Him, God loves to play against a stacked deck. And certainly, when it comes to our promises of salvation, He absolutely does that. But even beyond His promises, even beyond salvation, again, it's His character. It's part of His personality. He likes to play against a stacked deck. I don't know why, except that He enjoys the glory. He enjoys the fact that we have no other reason that we can point to except that God stepped in. God chose to intervene.

So, that reality changes the way we hope, the way we wait, the way that we pray. Because those impossible situations that each of us have in our lives, even right now, are not impossible for God. For God all things are possible. The Scripture tells us that and assures us of that.

And look, if you've had a relationship with God for some time you've seen this, haven't you? You have the stories to tell where God did the inexplicable. He did the miraculous. He did the totally unexpected.

You've seen doctors dismayed at the Great Physician stepping in and saving a loved one that never should have been saved, it never could happen. You've seen hardened hearts that were melted, that were transformed. You've seen the irretrievably lost get found. You've seen those things. You've seen God show up in your life in in those ways, in your faith journey with Him. Because He loves to play against a stacked deck. So, you're telling me there's a chance ... Yes, yes, I am.

So, the idealists among us and the realists among us, those who are naturally hopeful and those who are naturally skeptical, can both have hope. They can both wait, they can both pray, because this is true—not of us. This is true about who God is. He loves a stacked deck. My wife Dayna is a total idealist and I'm a total realist. Some might even say I'm a skeptic. So, you know, when two celebrities get engaged or get married, her natural response is (let's just say a global pop star and an NFL wide receiver getting engaged), "That is so sweet! I hope they have a wonderful life together." She really says those things. She's just a very nice person. I say, "I give them three years max before the whole thing implodes ... four years if they're lucky. That would be an amazing twelve months after those three years, if they make it that far." But the idealists,

the realists among us, the hopeful, the skeptics, can all have hope. Because God is a God who loves to show up in the impossible. He loves when the odds are against Him. He likes to do these things in the midst of those kinds of circumstances.

I want to ask you a question that I started with. What are the things that you're hoping for? What are the things you're waiting on, that you're praying for? Maybe even more important than that, what are the things that you've given up hoping and waiting and praying for?

And I'd like to ask you to consider meditating on this passage, meditating on this truth about God, about His character, about His personality, meditating on those realities. And I want to ask you to consider revival of that hope, that waiting, those prayers. I want you to consider doing that, in light of what we've seen about God in this passage today. Whatever that situation is, whomever that person might be that seems so out of reach ... God loves playing against a stacked deck. I want you to ask you to consider bringing Him back in on that, begging Him, pleading with Him, asking Him questions. *God, would You show up? Would You act? Would You do something?* He likes being asked. He likes being invited to those impossible situations in our lives.

And can God answer those prayers? Absolutely. We have the stories to tell. He has done it time and time again.

Will He answer those prayers if it's not a promise that He's made? Will He answer those prayers? Perhaps. Maybe He will, maybe He won't. That's up to Him.

But I know this: when we hope and wait and pray and invite Him into these parts of our lives that seem impossible, that are out of reach, what we're doing is drawing near to God. And Scripture tells us, and promises, even, that if we draw near to Him, He draws near to us. And where do we find ourselves? We find ourselves in the presence of God. There's a special experience of His presence that we gain in hoping and waiting and praying. So, even if God chooses not to answer, even if He makes that choice, do you know what you're left with? You're left with Him. You're left with His presence. His presence is your prize for living by faith. The closeness and intimacy with your Creator are what you get to enjoy, even if He doesn't answer that prayer, when He doesn't do what you've hoped and waited for.

You know, I've seen God enjoy playing against stacked decks in my own family too. I had an uncle who had heard God's Word at a very young age. And yet, most of his life—decades of his life—he mostly brought pain and destruction into other people's lives. There were abused

wives, there were neglected children, my cousins. You know, when a cargo plane goes down in a field you see the wreckage afterward. That's kind of what his life looked like. It was just the scattered remains of the plane going down.

And then, at fifty-five years of age, my uncle was diagnosed with late-stage cancer, and he was given just a couple of weeks to live. My dad and I talked about it and decided we needed to go. My uncle was in the Iowa at the time, so we made that thousand-mile journey. And as we drove we prayed two prayers. We prayed, "God, would you save him? And would you heal him?" We prayed for his salvation; we prayed for his healing. We walked in the room where he lay on his death bed, and his first words that he muttered to us in anger were, "Why are you here?"

Over the next couple of weeks, he heard the Word of God read to him again. He listened to those eternal truths. He heard about Jesus' death and resurrection for him, this free gift of salvation. Do you know what he did? He put his trust in Jesus Christ. He said, "God, I want that spiritual résumé to be mine. Remove my sin and give me Your righteousness." He prayed that prayer. And in that very moment he became a child of God. Wow. God answered that prayer. It was awesome. For the first time maybe ever, his face had a smile that you couldn't wipe off. He never smiled before. That natural snarl turned into laughter. He rarely laughed. And the hateful words became songs of praise.

Miracle of miracles—we celebrated that God had answered our prayer.

We had also prayed that God would show up in the impossible, that God would heal my uncle of his cancer. We just thought, *It's only right, Lord, that he might have a chance to actually walk with You, follow You. He could tell his story. Think about the glory that You could get, God, by him telling his story of an absolutely transformed life.*

God chose not to answer that prayer. He accepted Christ. And then seventy-two hours later he was in the presence of Jesus.

God loves to play against a stacked deck. There is nothing that we can't bring to Him. There's nothing that He can't do. Nothing is too hard for Him.

Can He answer those prayers? Absolutely.

Will He answer them? Maybe. That's up to Him. That's His decision. But even if He doesn't, this is true. His presence is your prize for walking in faith. Intimacy with your Creator,

with your Savior, is what you get to enjoy, even where He chooses not to answer. That's what He gives us.

Let's go to Him in prayer. Let's thank Him for that. Let's ask Him to continue to do this kind of work, the work He did in Abraham's heart and ours.

Heavenly Father, we praise You that this is how You've chosen to work among us; that this is who You are. You enjoy showing off your immense power and love for us by acting in our salvation and in our lives in these unmistakable ways, these profound ways that we can't deny. So, there is always hope, even when it is hope against hope. We believe that.

So, Lord, I pray that as You continue to reveal this truth about Yourself, about Your character and Your personality, in each of our hearts You would draw us closer to You; that You would bring back and revive that hope, that waiting, that praying, that maybe we've given up on. I pray that we would bring that back into Your presence, and that we would find ourselves in Your presence as we do that. Lord, we pray for that in Your Son's holy and precious name. Amen.