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ZWTF

Zapping-you Whenever Thoughts Flow

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ROMANS Part 36

Chapter 4:17-25

According as it is written that, A father of many nations have I appointed you—facing which, he believes it of the God Who is vivifying the dead and calling what is not as if it were—who, being beyond expectation, believes in expectation, for him to become the father of many nations, according to that which has been declared, “Thus shall be your seed.”

And, not being infirm in faith, he considers his body, already deadened (being inherently somewhere about a hundred years) and the deadening of the matrix of Sarah, yet the promise of God was not doubted in unbelief, but he was invigorated by faith, giving glory to God, being fully assured also, that, what He has promised, He is able to do also. Wherefore, also, it is reckoned to him for righteousness.

Now it was not written because of him only, that it is reckoned to him, but because of us also, to whom it is about to be reckoned, who are believing on Him Who rouses Jesus our Lord from among the dead. Who was given up because of our offenses, and was roused because of our justifying.

My favorite figure of speech is “prolepsis,” and here in this passage we have one of the best examples of it.

“Prolepsis” is a two-part, Late Latin/Greek word whose elements are “before” (*pro*) and “take” (*lepsis*). Thus, it means “to take before.” It is a figure of speech that announces a thing as though it were, before it is. Before Abraham has generated a single son, God says of him, “A father of many nations I have appointed you.” The reason this is a figure of speech is because Abraham was still childless. Had this been a literal statement rather than a

figurative one, God would have said, “A father of many nations will I make you.” God would have spoken of it as a future event. But here he says he has done it. Abraham faces this radical statement and “believes it of the God Who is vivifying the dead and calling what is not as if it were.” How good of God to give Abraham and us a precise definition of prolepsis smack in the middle of a context employing it. Prolepsis is, “calling what is not as if it were.”

Hebrews 11:1 acquaints us with God’s definition of faith:





Not among the celestials.

Now faith is an assumption of what is being expected, a conviction concerning matters which are not being observed.

“An assumption of what is being expected, though not observed” is exactly what Abraham exercised. He exercised his faith. This is why he’s the father of faith. Abraham assumed to be true what God merely told him was true apart from evidence. God did help Abraham, however. He helped him by using the figure of speech called prolepsis, that is, He called what was not (Abraham was childless) as though it were (“I have appointed you a father of many nations”).

This is a bold figure of speech. It doesn’t say that something is *going* to happen, but rather that something has *already* happened. It was obvious to Abraham that the thing hadn’t happened. (Duh. This is where the figure of speech comes in. A figure of speech is not *literally* true); but here was God, speaking of it as though it were true. This power-figure of speech rattles the brain in a good way.

To God, the thing that is going to happen is so certain (why wouldn’t it be? God tells the end from the

beginning—Isaiah 46:10), that He speaks of it as though it has already happened. This is designed to bolster our confidence in Him—and it does.

Another great example of prolepsis occurs in Ephesians 2:5-7, where God says concerning members of Christ’s body:

[He] vivifies us together in Christ (in grace are you saved!) and rouses us together and seats us together among the celestials, in Christ Jesus, that, in the oncoming eons, He should be displaying the transcendent riches of His grace in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

“UM, NO, I’M IN PENNSYLVANIA”

The startling statement here is that He “seats us together among the celestials.” God speaks as though He is doing it now. I know some people who—failing to grasp this figure—insist that we are now, literally, seated among the celestials. “God said it, so it must be true,” they say. When people have told me this in the past, I have looked around and said, “Um, no, I am currently in Pennsylvania, surrounded by snow and dismal mountains.” They

mock me for my lack of faith. I mock them for their lack of knowledge of figures of speech. I also mock them by retorting, “I think I will know it when I am literally seated among the celestials. I don’t think I am so stupid so as to confuse dismal, snowy mountains in Pennsylvania with the right hand of God among the celestials.” The source of this misunderstanding is a simple (yet fatal) misunderstanding of a grand and wonderful figure of speech God employs to assure His children of a future promise so sure, secure and guaranteed, that God—Who already sees to the end of a thing—speaks of it as though it were already done. To Him, it is. He’s God.

Isn’t this comforting? Assuring?

Allow me to answer these two questions: Yes—and yes.

Haven’t you been comforted when, asking someone to take care of a task for you, you hear in response, “It’s as good as done.” You no longer worry about the thing. Even better if they say, “Consider it done.” Even better if they say, “Done!” Prolepsis is God saying, “Done!” Now all we have to do is wait for the literal fulfillment. But the literal fulfillment is so sure and certain that God gets a head start on it—giving us a head start as well—by speaking boldly concerning the sureness of it. I don’t know about you, but this kind of bold figure puts me in the mood to begin thinking as God thinks concerning me. Ah! This is the whole “trick” of Romans—for us to think of ourselves as God thinks of us.

This was Abraham.

“Facing which, he believes it of the God Who is vivifying the dead and calling what is not as if it were.”

Abraham faced what God said He would do and, in fact, what God said He’d already done (prolepsis). I love the verb, “facing.” Abraham looked right at what God declared: “according to that which has been declared” (verse 18). Why not? God is strong, humans are weak. Divine declarations are always to be preferred over the human variety. Believing God’s “craziness” was a far better option to Abraham than looking down at his own dismal reality. But Abraham did that as well—Scripture tells us he did it. As Abraham considered his own body (he literally looked at it), no doubt he repeatedly told himself, “Well, the same God Who is vivifying the dead is the One telling me this.” It was important for Abraham to assure himself again and again God’s power over death, and to review to himself those times throughout Israel’s history when God raised dead people. Good thing for Abraham, because things weren’t going so well for one of our favorite patriarchs.

ABRAHAM LOOKS DOWN

“And, not being infirm in faith, he considers his body, already deadened (being in-herently somewhere about a hundred years) and the deadening of the matrix of Sarah” (verse 20).”

Though Abraham had much faith in God’s bold declaration, he still “considered his body, already deadened.” This has always amused and somewhat saddened me. Remember that the context here is God making Abraham “a father of many nations.” This is the promise that Abraham faced and believed. After facing this promise, he faced the one part of his body responsible for making him the father of a single son, let alone of many nations. Simply stated, he looked down and tried to imagine his reproductive organ doing anything except succumbing to gravity and that deadly and debilitating force known as inertia.

Abraham: Did you hear that, Reproductive Organ? God has declared me to be the father of many nations. Does this declaration, um—*move* you in any way?

Reproductive Organ: Um, excuse me but, for a smart guy, you seem quite ignorant of the force known as “inertia.”

Abraham: I am not as ignorant as you think. Inertia is the property of matter by which it retains its state of rest or its velocity along a straight line so long as it is not acted upon by an external force.

Reproductive Organ: Well stated. Do you find me in a state of velocity—or of rest?

Abraham: We both know the answer to that question.

Reproductive Organ: And where is the straight line, my friend?

Abraham: You appear to be staring at the floor.

Reproductive Organ: You shall be celebrated for such wisdom. I have seen nothing but the floor for the better part of a decade.

Abraham: I am sorry.

Reproductive Organ: Yes, you are.

Abraham: But what about the “acted upon by an external force” part? An external force can overcome the inertia beneath which you, um ...

Reproductive Organ: “Rest?”

Abraham: Something like that.

Reproductive Organ: What “external force” could you be referring to.

Abraham: I could be referring to Sarah. Yes, her.

Reproductive Organ: (reminiscing): Ah. A beautiful woman, that Sarah I have great memories of her.

Abraham: *Memories?*

Reproductive Organ: (singing) *Mem'ries,*

Light the corners of my mind

Misty water-colored memories

Of the way we were ...

Abraham: Stop singing that song.

Reproductive Organ: She's dead.

Abraham: Barbara Streisand?

Reproductive Organ: No. Sarah. Read the context. "The deadening of the matrix of Sarah." Even if I could "attend the party," "go to the dance," "pitch the tent," "rise to the occasion"—whatever happy euphemism you like to use here—there's the matter of a hen laying no eggs. Are you following me?

Abraham: There's hope.

Reproductive Organ: Have you looked up the word "dead" in the dictionary lately?

Abraham: I mean, there is hope in God. But it's not just hope. It's belief. God spoke this thing. How about *you* read the context: "... the promise was not doubted in unbelief." Or how about this: "... being fully assured also, that what He has promised, He is able also to do."

Reproductive Organ: Don't get me wrong. I'm *for* it. Show me the money, though. I'd love to visit the old neighborhood. Times are hard, Friend—not literally, of course.

Abraham: I can't take my eyes from verse 20, "... but he was invigorated by faith, giving glory to God."

Reproductive Organ: Wait. "Invigorated." Isn't that the same root word from which we get, "Viagra"?

Abraham: I believe it is.

Reproductive Organ: Oh, my gosh. You're not going to believe this, but something very strange is happening.

Abraham: Glory to God! You can't mean—

Reproductive Organ: Can't you feel it? Don't quote me, but we seem to be producing lumber here. I'm feeling like a Weyerhaeuser distribution center. Yes, it is unmistakable.

Abraham: It's the spirit of God!

Reproductive Organ: Whatever. All I know is: Let's go find Sarah. *Now.*

And so God counted the faith of Abraham to be righteousness. It was as simple as Abraham believing God's promise. God helped him by speaking as though that promise were already true. To show Abraham (and us), the practicality and power of belief, Abraham's reproductive organ "rose from the dead," basking in the light of revelation. Sarah, in turn, responded to the response of

Abraham's body and disbursed the necessary ingredient to conceive a child.

Faith is not a theory. It is not nothing. Faith *does* stuff. In Abraham's case, it roused his deadened reproductive organ. In our case, it gives us the power not only to cope with this difficult life, but to thrive in the face of the death surrounding us. While the world dies around us, we rub our hands and warm our bodies next to the fire of God's promises concerning us: we are justified in his sight (Romans 5:1); He is at peace with us (2 Corinthians 5:18); nothing can now condemn us (Romans 8:1). These things are even better than re-vitalized anatomical parts.

As Paul says in Colossians 1:10 concerning the vitalizing power of God, we are to be:

... bearing fruit in every good work, and growing in the realization of God; being endued with all power, in accord with the might of His glory, for all endurance and patience, with joy; at the same time giving thanks to the Father, Who makes you competent for a part of the allotment of the saints, in light.

—Colossians 1:10-12

THE POWER OF PATIENCE

When we think of being "endued with all power," we think of doing miracles: curing the sick, raising the dead, walking on water. These things do not belong to maturity. Rather, this power, says Paul, is "for all endurance and patience, with joy," and for giving thanks. The greatest manifestation of the power of God, in this era, is what makes a person endure hardship and be patience in the face of not seeing what we so ardently expect. It is in giving thanks for all circumstances, even hard ones. Belief, while simple, produces complex, wonderful fruit. In ancient days, it raised dead flesh. In these days of spiritual maturity, it raises dead expectations. We consider our world, and find nothing. We consider ourselves, and see death beyond repair. Now, let us look to God and believe all the wonderful things God says of us through Paul in this marvelous letter. Thus engaged, we will enjoy real power not only to survive, but to thrive spiritually until the snatching away.

We are believing these things, not of a human—who could never be trusted—but of a God Who is vivifying the dead, and Who, very soon, shall will be transforming our bodies and changing them into the likeness of His body of glory (Romans 8:11).

I look forward to this, together with you.

In the meantime, I simply believe it. —MZ