

# Certainty and Mental Assent Clarified in Romans 4:21-22

By René A. López

Today many people are wondering whether a person needs to be certain of God's eternal-life-promise, as a necessary byproduct, the moment one believes His promise to save him. That is, when God justified Abraham upon believing Him to supply a Savior, did Abraham need to be convinced of the once-and-for-all promise of supplying a Savior by which he would be justified (see Gen 15:6)? Or can a person be as equally justified by believing that obedience to God and faith in His promise (to supply salvation through the promised Seed known today as Jesus Christ) can save him? Can one today claim to believe Jesus for eternal life and lack eternal-assurance the moment of faith? How about if one is ignorant of having assurance upon placing one's faith in Jesus for eternal life? Does such an understanding grasp the gift-of-eternal-life offer, or would this not be contradictory? For how can one believe in Christ alone for the gift of eternal life (John 1:12; 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; 11:25–27; 20:30–31) and doubt their salvation at that same moment?

Furthermore, others have objected that what Abraham believed was more than mere "intellectual assent." Is this assessment accurate? Well Paul answers both of these questions according to Romans 4:21-22.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Though Abraham did not think in our terms and understand today's theologically loaded arguments, Gen 15:6 can be used to answer whether or not Abraham was sure of his eternal destiny the moment he believed God's promise to save him, which resulted in his justification. The author of Gen 15:6 nor Paul in Rom 4:21-22 pen their accounts to *directly* address the point of this article, yet Scripture can be used to derive *indirect* theological principles that teach us today on any contemporary subject. For example, such passages like Lev 18:22; Ps 139:13-16; Prov 23:29-35; Rom 13:1-7 have been correctly used to *indirectly* address *directly* such issues as homosexual marriages, abortion, smoking marijuana and even speeding by disobeying the government. Without violating the author's intent Paul used OT accounts to instruct NT believers on contemporary issues of his day (1 Cor 10:1-11; 2 Tim 3:16-17 primarily refers to the OT that may have included NT revelation as well). Not only that, but the subject at hand was directly addressed by Paul—without using contemporary terms—that a man is justified apart from works (not a faith plus combo approach) by quoting Genesis 15:6 to validate his NT teaching of Rom 3:21–4:25. By default, knowing and believing this truth must bring about certainty of one's salvation since it solely depends on Jesus Christ's payment and our simple acceptance (i.e., by faith) of that. To believe in a faith plus works approach misses God's only condition by which man can receive this gift offered to him and be saved. To miss this or refuse to believe this point is not the same as believing it, nor will God give anyone a pass if an individual dies believing such a combo (of obedience plus faith) view of salvation. If God does not enforce this standard here why should He exclude anyone from being saved? The components that are needed to meet God's criterion to be saved is faith alone in Christ alone, which by default if understood and accepted must result in having assurance for anyone who believes it. Furthermore, not only does Rom 4:21 clearly state that Abraham was certain of that promise

## Certainty Clarified

Paul defines Abraham's faith as "being fully convinced" (*plêrophoreô*). Paul's definition of "faith" follows upon v 20. The term "fully convinced" is not the best translation. It wrongly implies the possibility of varying degrees of assurance (99%, 90%, 80%, etc...) in believing the initial promise. Scripture knows of only two options when it comes to believing God's promise of supplying a Savior that will come through Abraham: either one is or is not convinced of the truth that Jesus Christ gives eternal life (cf. John 6:47). The Greek term *plêrophoreô* basically means: to be assured, or to be certain (BDAG, 827). The entire context refers to faith in the promise of God. Paul, now, clarifies Abraham's faith as fundamentally being "assured" or "convinced" of God's declared or "promised" seed. Although time might have elapsed before Abraham became convinced or certain that God could and would fulfill His promise to provide an heir from his dead body that would ultimately guarantee and result in the arrival of the Savior of the world (Gen 12:1-15:5; Rom 4:17-20), until he became certain of this fact (by believing God's promise apart from any works as the context shows [Gen 4:2-5]) God did not credit His righteousness to Abraham's account (Gen 15:6).<sup>2</sup>

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(because he believed in God's promise apart from works as the immediate context of Rom 4:2-5 shows), but it also teaches that it was something that he simply accented mentally to (regardless of the contemporary terminology employed in today's argument). Again, Paul answers *indirectly* both of these issues in Rom 4:21-22.

<sup>2</sup> The Hiphil perfect verb אָמַן ("believe" or "to have faith") has generally a causative force that has been explained in various ways. *First*, Victor P. Hamilton, however, correctly says, "The standard nuance attached to the Hiphil, that is, causative, 'to make firm,' is certainly ruled out for Gen. 15:6" (*The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990], 424). *Second*, though grammatically the Hiphil perfect אָמַן may function as a *causative* with God as the object having a say in the matter of Abram's faith, it does not mean "God gave Abraham the faith to believe." Causing something (or having a say in causing) something to occur is *not* the same as "furnishing the very thing or event" that occurs. For example, causing someone to eat by enticing him or her by turning on the cooking channel is not the same as furnishing the person with his or her appetite to eat. Obviously God influenced Abraham's faith like miracles and many other things biblically influence us to believe. But that is not the same as God furnishing the faith by which one believes. So even if one were to take the strict causative view here of the "Hiphil perfect," it does not prove theologically or grammatically that God supplied Abraham's faith. *Third*, the "Hiphil" causative is not the best option for interpreting the Hebrew verb אָמַן. The verb may indicate "a so-called 'internal-transitive' function, defined as used for the entering into a certain condition and, further, the being in the same" (see GKC 53e). This is the view taken by James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford, Oxford University, 1961), 177-87. Barr notes E. Pfeiffer's definition of "believe" (אָמַן) and concludes, "For Pfeiffer the decisive thing about faith in the OT is the reciprocal relation of activity and passivity, and this is related to two linguistic aspects: (a) the etymological sense of 'firmness' (i.e., the firmness of God; on this side man is passive) (b) the declarative-estimative function of the theme (man is active in 'talking God to be firm')" (*Semantics of Biblical Language*, 179). Hamilton also notes this and says, "Abram 'became steadfast (or firm) in Yahweh.' This nuance differs from the previous two in that it emphasizes the **certainty and the sureness of the believer, rather than the certainty of the object**

That is why nothing is said of Abram's belief and justification until Genesis 15:6. Some scholars, however, believe Abraham was justified as early as chapter 12. Perhaps this is true, but until Genesis 15:6 no definitive statement recorded in Scripture appears that points this out. Hence Paul continues to repeat Genesis 15:6 throughout Romans 4. Regardless something less than 100% certainty does not adequately explain Abraham's faith in God's promise. Thus, Abraham's eternal certainty (or security) must result as the byproduct of his faith once he believes God's promise to justify him through the coming of a Savior.<sup>3</sup> Hebrews

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**or statement in which faith was placed** [bold was added for emphasis]. What prompted Abram's faith was certainly the promise of the Lord, and that is the incentive to faith. But this is a theological observation, not a linguistic one" (*Genesis Chapters 1–17*, 424). Thus, Abraham's faith seen by the Hiphil verb יָדַע argues for assurance being a necessary byproduct of Abraham's belief in God's eternal promise. *Fourth*, in Romans 4:22, Paul also affirms the "certainty" of Abraham's faith seen in the interpretation of Genesis 15:6.

<sup>3</sup> I am fully aware that in the history of Systematic Theology *assurance* and *eternal security* have been used differently. For example, *assurance* has been used subjectively of what a person acquires as a result of understanding and believing the justifying-gospel truth. On the other hand, *eternal security* has been used objectively of what God does for the believer (i.e., preserve him or her eternally safe) regardless of their subjective knowledge of it or whether they lose assurance later. Though I have no problem with this distinction, there is an inherent fallacy for many who point to this distinction and at the same time claim that because of its historical usage it was never necessary for a person to have eternal security or assurance as part of his salvation as a necessary condition or result stemming from their faith in Christ. *First*, though we have used *assurance* (subjectively) and *eternal security* (objectively) technically (not historically) speaking it is not incorrect to use *eternal security* in an subjective sense, because *assurance* and *security* is what a person subjectively should derive at the moment he understands and believes in the offer of faith alone in Christ alone for *salvation, justification* or *eternal life*. Furthermore, since *assurance* and *security* are synonymous terms how could one be wrong by using them interchangeably (see *Websters' Dictionary Third New International ed.* [Merriam-Webster Publishers, 1986], p 133)? *Second*, although historically speaking there is nothing wrong in distinguishing *assurance* and *eternal security*, surely, even in keeping with this distinction, a person must have assurance of the once-and-for-all salvation transaction he is asked to believe. How can a person believe in Christ (without understanding eternal life, life after death, the sin problem that is keeping him or her apart from God, or that it is not by works) and not be sure what he believed in Him for and still be *objectively secure by God* if he has not understood and therefore not believed in God's offer, which entails the result of the problem, solution and the resulting transaction? Lewis Sperry Chafer who distinguished *assurance* from *eternal security* believed that if one lacked assurance it could result from the points mentioned above: a lack of understanding the eternal gospel offer of regeneration and/or not trusting in Christ for eternal life (whom He viewed as being synonymous with eternal life since this life is inseparable from Him). Hence he says: "One who understands that Jesus Christ died for him and provided a complete salvation which is offered to anyone who sincerely believes in Christ can, accordingly, have assurance of his salvation just as soon as he meets the condition of trusting in Christ as his Savior. In many cases, lack of assurance is due to incomplete understanding of the nature of salvation. Once it is understood that salvation is a gift which cannot be earned, cannot be obtained by human effort, and cannot be deserved, and is available as a gift of God to all who will receive it by faith, a proper basis for assurance of salvation is provided, **and the question resolves itself into the issue of whether one has really trusted in Christ...** Among the various divine accomplishments which together constitute the salvation of a soul, the importation

11 also serves as a divine commentary and insight into the essence of the kind of faith that contained eternal certainty which Abraham and many others possessed. Hebrews 11:13 states, "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (see also Heb 11:1). Obviously, these are *promises*, not just the promise of salvation, but regardless the salvation offer was included as part of these promises as well as showing that assurance was of the essence of saving faith which OT saints understood and believed or else the entire chapter 11 of Hebrews is senseless. Thus eternal assurance was part of their understanding and trust, for that is part of the point of Hebrews 11. That is, by having faith in God's promises or promise they were completely sure (100%).<sup>4</sup>

Being certain or having assurance of God's eternal promise that cannot be lost is not an added condition but a byproduct of understanding and accepting the offer, which if missed it comes *short* of understanding God's free offer and thereby accepting it. For not being eternally assured of God's promise to provide justification (according to Paul) or eternal life (according to John) misunderstands the very offer at the point one is asked to believe it. At this point

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of a new life from God is, in the Bible, given the supreme emphasis. Upwards of eighty-five New Testament passages attest this feature of saving grace. Consideration of these passages discloses the fact that this imparted life is the *gift* of God to all those who believe on Christ (John 10:28; Rom. 6:23); it is *from* Christ (John 14:6); it *is* Christ indwelling the believer in the sense that eternal life is inseparable from Him (Col. 1:27; 1 John 5:11, 12), and therefore is as eternal as He is eternal" (*Major Bible Themes*, rev., John F. Walvoord [Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 1926; reprinted 1974], 213, *bold was added by author for emphasis and italics are original*).

<sup>4</sup> All faith involves 100% certainty, but this does not mean there are varying degrees one believes of whole propositions. That is, by believing three of four complete propositions one can be said to have 75% degree faith since statistically three out of four comes out to 75%. For example, Jesus states in John 6:47, "**Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life.**" To say one is 90% sure of this statement is equal to saying he is still thinking about it but is not convinced yet. Thus he does not believe the offer of salvation. Anything less than 100% conviction of a single proposition comes short of believing the offer and relegates it to the realm of doubt that may need more evidence, time or help from God to become convinced of the truth. One can believe more biblical propositions made by Jesus that helps one trust in Him to meet other areas of their life. This type of faith is called *great faith* (see Matt 8:5-12). Yet if one solely believes in Jesus for eternal life and is incapable to believe Jesus can heal his son (since the disciples had just failed to perform the healing, see Mark 9:14-29), this person needs to increase his faith by believing that Jesus can do more than merely give the person eternal life or do more than just one, two or three things. Notice, however, that by saying this, such a person does not vacillate upon believing in a single proposition. What he may vacillate on is whether he trusts Jesus for more biblical promises made by Him at any given point. This may rightly be called *weak faith* instead of *great faith*. For a thorough discussion of *varying degrees of faith* see Robert N. Wilkin, "Should We Rethink the Idea of Degrees of Faith?," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 19 (Autumn, 2006), 3–21.

one must explain to the recipient what this offer entails if they have not understood it. In biblical days this offer did not exist in a vacuum; therefore most, if not all, of the biblical characters understood the eternal ramifications and certainty these promises carried as the entire chapter of Hebrews 11 clearly shows, but this is not so today where more than a 2,000 years gap exists between us and the biblical culture where this concept originated. Thus, it is up to the evangelist to clarify the certainty entailed in the offer of justification (or eternal life). If we qualify a recipients' comprehension in other areas where they might misunderstand additional conditions to receive justification: like attending church, obeying God's commandments, and many more, why should we not clarify that the promise of justification entails a once-and-for-all done deal that can never be lost in the future as a byproduct of receiving eternal life? Unless one understands this concept what is the person trusting in if he expects to lose his justification status at a future point when he sins? Furthermore being ignorant of the certainty explicitly and implicitly in the offer of justification does not excuse one from meeting the necessary cognitive condition of what God demands one must believe since it is part of the offer. If there is a bare minimum that one must believe in order to be justified (faith alone in Christ alone), being certain of the security that the offer entails cannot be something extraneous since it is clearly what we imply by the word "alone."

## **Mental Assent Clarified**

Clearly Abraham's faith contained an eternal certainty/assurance in God's promise since He is powerful enough to fulfill the promise; then logically at the point of believing this promise Abraham understood he could not lose what was not in his power to obtain. Thus, by faith alone in God's promise alone to provide a Savior entails the certainty and condition a person needs to have as part of what they believe for one to receive God's justification. Yet, this is not an "act of the will" Abraham exercised but rather a "conviction" or "persuasion" that what God promised is true. No one can ever become convinced by an act of the will if they mentally believe something is false. Even at a basic human level faith is a conviction that something is certain, reliable, or true (cf. BAGD, 660-62; BDAG, 816-17). Hence, at the very moment of faith, God illuminates a person's mind allowing one to become persuaded or convinced of the truth (cf. Acts 16:14; 2 Cor 4:6).

Thus, in one sense, it is incorrect to speak of the exercise of simple faith as "intellectual assent" because it carries the connotations of being disinterested or detached, and carries pejorative connotations. However, in another sense, defining the exercise of simple faith as "intellectual assent" technically speaking is correct, because intellect means, "the capacity for rational or intelligent thought" and assent means, "to agree." Putting both of these together implies that if one intellectually assents, he has thought intelligently about God's promise

and afterward agreed that it is true by faith. If the object of one's intellectual assent refers to believing God's promise to attain His righteousness, then by intellectually assenting a person complied with the necessary condition to obtain that promise. Obviously, "He" (God) is powerful enough to "perform" the incredible promise of supplying a Savior from Sarah's dead womb and Abraham's dead body. This is exactly what Abraham became convinced/believed (vv 17-20), and "therefore" (*dio*, indicates an emphatic marker of result) because Abraham complied with God's sole condition for justification: "it was accounted to him for righteousness" (cf. 4:3-5).

In conclusion one cannot say according to Romans 4:21 that Abraham's belief in God's promise to supply a Savior was something short of being 100% certain. Abraham needed to be convinced of the once-and-for-all eternal accomplishment by God for God to justify him? Furthermore, by Abraham intellectually assenting to God's promise to supply a Savior it means he simply thought carefully about God's promise and agreed with the necessary conditions to receive it according to Romans 4:22. Both of these issues are answered by Paul in Romans 4:21-22.

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