

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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Faith and the Quick Fix

Genesis 15:1-21

I'm certainly not the first person who has taken Genesis 15 and used it to reflect on the meaning of faith. Paul is one of the biblical writers who tackles this topic. In fact, a piece of his discussion in Romans 4 is printed in your bulletin for today. Paul says that in view of God's promises, Abraham didn't weaken in his faith, didn't waver through unbelief. Instead, says Paul, Abraham "was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised" (vv. 20-21). Didn't weaken. Didn't waver. Was fully persuaded. Paul gives Abraham really high marks for his faith.

I get what Paul is doing, but I also know that in order to do it, he has to turn the spotlight away from some of those episodes when Abraham's faith wasn't so solid and exemplary. Like the two times that he passed off his wife Sarah as his sister, as well as the time he did the same with Rebekah, in order to save his own skin. Or the time that Abraham and Sarah grew impatient with God and Abraham ended up having a son by his servant Hagar in an attempt to expedite God's plans. Paul doesn't devote much coverage to these not-so-faithful moments in Abraham's journey.

And what about the plan B that Abraham proposes in the opening of this morning's Scripture passage. Though God has promised Abraham and Sarah that he will make of them a great nation, they're still focused on the fact that they're childless. So how is this divine plan supposed to work? How is Abraham going to be the father of a great nation if he can't even be the father of just one little baby? In order to move things along and make sure that God's promise comes true, Abraham offers a shortcut, a quick fix named Eliezer of Damascus. If Abraham can adopt his servant Eliezer, that solves the problem. Work through a few legal formalities, and there you have it, an instant heir!

But what God has promised isn't simply an heir. Rather, God has guaranteed an heir from Abraham's own line, which is going to require a pregnant Sarah, which at the present time isn't happening, and doesn't show any signs of happening. So to reassure Abraham that it will eventually happen, God takes him outside and gives him a stellar reminder about divine dependability. "Look up there and count the stars, if you're able to," says God. "That's how many descendants you will have."

One person tells about a poster version of this story that he and his family have in their home. At one point, their son came up to his mother and said, "You know, if you go out at night and look up at the stars, that's how many kids you're going to have."¹ Now that's a simplistic misunderstanding of the story, but it does capture the impact that God was trying to make on Abraham. The sky, and all the stars in it, were more than Abraham could comprehend or control. And in a way, that's how it is with God's promise. It was greater than Abraham and Sarah could fathom. But that didn't make it any less true or any less reliable. God's point was simple: I keep my promises.

That's what Abraham, at a point of great fear and discouragement and doubt, needed to hear. It's what we as God's people, at many places in our own journey of faith, need to

hear. We need to hear that God keeps his promises. That's part of why we're here this morning, and every Sunday. We need to be regularly renewed about the reliability of God. So we sing songs like "Standing on the Promises": "Standing, standing, Standing on the promises of God my Savior; Standing, standing, I'm standing on the promises of God."

There were lots of times and experiences when Abraham wondered if God's promises were solid and firm enough to stand on. Would God really make good on his word? Could God be counted on to deliver? Would God's purpose eventually prevail, or would the passing of time, the reality of decay, and the power of death, ultimately thwart God's plans? Note the lively give and take between God and Abraham in this morning's text. It's a vivid reminder that the long journey of faith includes places and periods of doubt and apprehension. Abraham speaks frankly with God about how he perceives the situation. He doesn't suppress his uncertainties. He doesn't withhold his questions. "O Sovereign Lord, how can I know?" asks Abraham. "How can I know that if I have all these descendants, I'll have an estate to pass on to them, and what will it be?" Abraham is anxious and uncertain. He doesn't pretend that God's promises are easy to believe and accept. "O Lord," says Abraham, "help me understand. Show me more of what I need to know."

And God responds to Abraham's struggle. We've already seen how he takes Abraham outside and shows him the stars in order to reaffirm the divine promise. He also reminds Abraham of how he originally called him into this great plan of salvation. He even tells Abraham to help get things ready for a covenant making ceremony where God shows him just how personally involved and committed he is to this relationship with Abraham and his eventual descendants. All in all, though God doesn't give Abraham ironclad certainty about everything that's ahead, he does give Abraham enough insight to sustain him through this stage of the journey of faith. In other words, God shows Abraham what he needs to know in order to do his part at this moment in the story.

A few years ago, in a speech to the Bishops of Brazil, Pope Francis spoke insightfully about the need for the church to live out its witness in the world with a certain slowness. He said, "We are impatient, anxious to see the whole picture, but God lets us see things slowly, quietly." As God's people, we often face circumstances and experiences that make us uncertain and fearful, full of questions and doubts about the direction, the destination, and especially the pace, of God's plans. "O Sovereign Lord, how can we know that you are present and working out your purposes in our lives and in the world?" "O Sovereign Lord, how can we know that in the end, when all is said and done, that flourishing and life, not suffering and death, will have the last word?" "O Sovereign Lord, how can we know that the promised land of your kingdom, an everlasting realm of justice and peace, is for real, and that we will get there to inhabit it and rejoice in it?" "O Sovereign Lord, how can we know?"

God usually doesn't respond with a fully detailed description of the journey's end, or the route that will lead there. He doesn't usually give us an answer that completely eradicates all doubts and replaces them with absolute, one hundred percent, foolproof certitude. In fact, those kinds of answers would run counter to what God actually wants from us in our relationship with him, namely, faith. God wants us to trust him. He wants us to believe that he loves us, and that our lives, and the life of the world, have their source and their destination in him. So what God often does, as he did with Abraham, is speak his word of promise to us again. In various ways, he restates his faithfulness, his covenant commitment. He lets us see things, perhaps slowly and quietly, that confirm what Paul told the Corinthians, that "no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Cor. 1:20).

We still live in between the confirmation of God's promises in Christ and the completion of God's promises in Christ. And as we do, we need to beware of letting our relationship with

God, our spirituality, be shaped by a quick-fix mentality. After all, that's part of the culture that we live in. Our lives are so geared toward speed, efficiency, and effectiveness. We get things done quickly and easily by clicking a mouse, touching a screen, or pushing a button. When we need nourishment, we eat fast food. When we need a relationship, we speed date. When we need our merchandise, we ask for overnight shipping. When we need a song, we download it right then and there. We have express lanes for driving, express lanes for oil changes, and express lanes for groceries. We get into the habit of thinking that whatever the challenge or the problem, surely there must be a quick and easy solution. Elect the right politician. Take the right pill. Get the right gadget. Read the right book. That's all it will take.

This drive for immediate results and instant satisfaction generates high levels of impatience. Even our understanding and definition of "instant" becomes faster. As an article in the *Boston Globe* described it:

We've come to expect things so quickly that researchers found people can't wait more than a few seconds for a video to load. One researcher examined the viewing habits of 6.7 million internet users. How long were subjects willing to be patient? Two seconds. After that they started abandoning the site. After five seconds, the abandonment rate is 25 percent. When you get to 10 seconds, half are gone. The results offer a glimpse into the future. As internet speeds increase, people will be even less willing to wait for that cute puppy video. The researcher, who spent years developing the study, worries someday people will be too impatient to conduct studies on patience.²

In an atmosphere of impatience that's so geared toward quick fixes and immediate gratification, the call to a life of slow, persevering, and deepening faith is a very countercultural journey. What sustains us isn't our own determination, but the faithfulness of God across time. Though we often want our Lord to be a God of quick fixes, shortcuts, or snap-of-the-finger results, he usually works through patient process toward long term outcomes. It's no wonder that we sometimes get frustrated by the fact that God doesn't seem to be in as much of a hurry as we are.

But through these struggles with God's long range plans, we learn more about how to see ourselves within a bigger story, and we learn how to play our part in that story, without necessarily getting to see all the results of our faith, in the here and now. Remember that according to our text, while Abraham slept, God again reminded him that the promise would come true, but it would take a long time. Only after several centuries would Abraham's descendants see and fully possess the land. Maybe Abraham thought to himself, "Centuries! I'm old and virtually as good as dead now! What do you mean, centuries?" But God reassured him that he could go to his grave in peace, knowing that God would still be at work on behalf of the promise.

Today's Scripture reading from Hebrews says of Abraham and other heroes of the faith, "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth" (Heb. 11:13). In a quick fix culture, where the prevailing motto is, "I want it, and I want it now," let's not be ashamed to live by long term, lasting faith, especially in those times and circumstances when it's hard to believe. God has spoken, and in Christ has put himself on the line to show us that he can be trusted.

¹ As told by Rolf Jacobson in the Sermon Brainwave podcast (No. 280) at https://www.workingpreacher.org/popoutplayer.aspx?podcast_id=373.

² Christopher Muther, "Instant Gratification Is Making Us Perpetually Impatient," *Boston Globe* (February 2, 2013).