

ABRAHAM: FATHER OF THE FAITHFUL
Gen 15:6; Rom 4; Gal 2-4; Heb 11:8-19; Jas 2:20-24
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Three men were walking on a wall,
Feeling, Faith, and Fact.
When Feeling got an awful fall,
Then Faith was taken back.
So close was Faith to Feeling,
That he stumbled and fell too.
But Fact remained and pulled Faith back,
And Faith brought Feeling too.¹

Have you ever felt that “walking by faith” has turned out to be a whole lot more like stumbling through the potholes of life? Have there been times—and maybe now is one of those times—when your spiritual life hasn't felt good? Perhaps you have felt fearful or frustrated or just flat. The scenario this poem describes goes like this: We find that we do not feel good about our spiritual life. As time goes on, we begin to doubt our faith. After all, shouldn't faith make us feel good? So, we begin to falter in our faith. Now, if we hope to recover from this downhill slide, our brains must remind our feelings that the essential truths concerning God and the life of faith have not changed. But there is a problem. Our brains need help. They seem unable to convince our feelings of the facts. This is where faith steps in. Notice in the poem that Fact does not grab hold of Feeling and set it back on its feet. Instead, Fact hangs on to Faith, sets Faith back on its feet, and then says, “Lead the way.”

Faith is central to all of life. For example, we go to a doctor whose name we cannot pronounce and whose degrees we have never verified. The doctor gives us a prescription we cannot read. We take it to a pharmacist we have never seen before who gives us a

¹Michael P. Green, ed., *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Baker, 1989), 138.

chemical compound we do not understand. Then we go home and take the medicine according to the instructions on the bottle. Now that's faith!

Today's lesson is the fifth and final in our study of Abraham. Abraham—the father of the faithful. Last Sunday, we saw how Abraham “passed the test” when summoned by God to sacrifice Isaac. Today, I want to focus on Gen 15:6. The influence of Gen 15:6 on the New Testament cannot be overestimated. The verse's definition of faith is important to Paul's arguments in Romans 4 and Galatians 2-4, and to James' arguments in James 2. Also, the author of Hebrews holds up Abraham as an example of faith in chapter 11, a chapter called by some “The Old Testament Hall of Fame.”

A literal translation of Gen 15:6 is:² “And he [Abram] believed in Yahweh, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Notice the ambiguity: “he reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Who reckoned whom? Did Abram consider God to be righteous? If so, this verse means: “Abram believed in Yahweh and Abram regarded it—the promise of posterity—as an expression of Yahweh's righteousness.” Although possible, this meaning is not very probable.³ Far more likely is the traditional understanding that God considered Abram (hereafter in this sermon, Abraham) to be righteous. This is the way Paul and James interpreted this verse in the New Testament.

The verbal form of “he believed” probably indicates repeated or continuing action—“he kept on believing.”⁴ Faith was Abraham's normal response to the word of Yahweh. I offer this expanded translation of Gen 15:6—“Abr[ah]am kept on trusting in the LORD, and the LORD accepted Abr[ah]am's faith, and that faith made him right with the LORD.” The Book of Hebrews provides this commentary on Abraham's faith:

¹¹By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹²And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore (Heb 11:11-12, NIV).

²וַיֵּאֱמֶן בַּיהוָה וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ צְדָקָה – *wehe'emin bayhwh wayyakhshveha lo tsedhaqah.*

³Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPSTC (Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 113; and Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC, vol. 1 (Word, 1987), 329-330.

⁴וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ – *wehe'emin* (waw + perfect). Wenham, *Genesis*, 324, 329.

In spite of his feelings of fear and frustration; in spite of the fact that by all appearances Abraham and Sarah were never going to have any children;⁵ Abraham persisted in his faith in God, *because he “considered God faithful who made the promise.”* Abraham accepted the word of the LORD as reliable and true, and he acted in accordance with that faith. As a result, the LORD declared Abraham righteous, and therefore acceptable.

By such faith, we—like Abraham—are made right with God. To state that we are saved by “faith alone” is true, depending—of course—upon our definition of “faith.” For Abraham, trusting in God was a way of life—although, on occasion, he did stumble in his walk with God. His walk was not perfect, but it was persistent. Abraham was faithful because he kept believing that God was faithful. The Apostle Paul writes,

Abraham never wavered in believing God’s promise. In fact, his faith grew stronger, and in this he brought glory to God (Rom 4:20, NLT).

We must not miss the point that the faith of Abraham is not in anything he sees in the world, but is in the word of God which will overcome the barrenness of the world.

Abraham’s faith is founded on the hearing of the word, not on the seeing of the world. For Abraham, “faith is reliance on God’s promise of overcoming the present for a new life.”⁶ For us, faith is to be the focus, the force, and the future for our lives.

In last Sunday’s sermon, we witnessed Abraham’s faith at work in his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. Again, we turn to the Book of Hebrews, and here we find the following:

¹⁷By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, ¹⁸even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” ¹⁹Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death (Heb 11:17-19, NIV).

According to the Epistle of James, Abraham’s faith expressed itself in works. Such works are not a merit for salvation, but a mark of salvation.⁷ Such works are not the roots

⁵I especially like Frederick Buechner’s fanciful retelling of the story where Abraham asks Yahweh’s angel, “Shall a child be born in the geriatric ward? Shall Medicare pick up the bill?” Cited by Scott Hoezee, “Genesis 22:1-14,” in Roger E. Van Harn, ed., *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday’s Texts*, vol. 1, The Old Testament and Acts (Eerdmans, 2001), 41.

⁶Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation (John Knox Press, 1982), 146.

⁷Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1995), 121.

of salvation, but the fruits of salvation. Like the old adage says, “The faith that saves is the faith that obeys.”

During the tough and trying times of our spiritual lives, when by all worldly appearances there is no basis for hope, we must ask the question, “Do I believe that God can be trusted?” And once we answer in the affirmative, then we must ask, “Am I willing to trust in God?” Am I willing, like Abraham, to take God at His word, and then—by the power of faith—take actions that demonstrate I have put my faith in a faithful God? Can God be trusted? Can I trust God? The answers define our lives and determine our standing with God.

Perhaps, like Abraham in Genesis 15, you and I need to start talking to Yahweh, the LORD God. Maybe we need to bare our souls before Him, with all of our doubts and desires. And when we have had our say, we need to let Him have His way. We need to speak openly, listen hopefully, and act faithfully. We know that if we persist in our faith, God will accept us and will consider us right in His sight. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) said, “Faith is to believe, on the word of God, what we do not see, and its reward is to see and enjoy what we believe.”

The story has been told of a man who was crossing a desert during the days of the pioneers. He ran into trouble and was dying of thirst when he spotted a pump near an abandoned shack. He had no water to prime the pump, but he noticed a jug of water near the pump with a note attached. It read: “There is just enough water in this jug to prime the pump, but not if you drink some first. This well has never gone dry, even in the worst of times. Pour the water in the top of the pump and pump the handle quickly. After you have had a drink, refill this jug for the next man who comes along.”

What would you do? Would you believe the note? Would you stake your life on its promise? Would you take what you could see or would you trust in what you could not see? The water or the word—which would you choose?

Are you thirsting for something more satisfying than what the world has to offer? Are you thirsting for something more spiritual than a self-centered life? Are you thirsting for a relationship with God and the peace that comes from knowing that you are right with God? Are you thirsty? Then read the note and follow the instructions. Of course,

you could guzzle down the water in the jug. You might not die of thirst, but all who follow in your footsteps will.

Abraham—the father of the faithful. Because he believed in God, not only was *he* made right with God, he was made by God the means by which blessing would come to *all the world*. *Because Abraham trusted in God, God—through Abraham—blessed the world. Hope for the world does not lie in the potential of mankind; it lies in the promises of God.*

God has spoken. We have a choice to make. And do not think for one moment that your decision determines only your destiny; it also determines whether you will be a blessing or a curse to the descendants who follow you. Yes, there have been times in my life when I wanted to “throw in the towel.” On more than one occasion, I have been so disappointed and discouraged by the church that I wanted to call it quits. But by the grace of God, somehow I survived. During the times of testing, I have thought of three reasons to hang on: Mark, Ryan, and Grant—my sons. My faithfulness or faithlessness does not affect me alone; it affects all those who follow in my footsteps.

“God wants to bless you”—that’s a statement I hear often in contemporary Christianity. It is true, but it is not the whole truth. Yes, God wants to bless you, but He also wants to make you a blessing to others. *Being blessed is wonderful! Being a blessing is hard work!*

God is calling . . . What is your answer?