

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today we're going to talk about faith. The sermon title today is simply, "Believe the Lord!" What does it mean to believe? What are the challenges of faith? What is the benefit of faith? All vitally important questions as we strive to Believe the Lord.

Before we get into the text, let's answer one question up front: "What is 'faith'?" What do we mean when we say, "Believe"? First, let's put out of our minds what we *don't* mean by faith when used in this church in the Biblical context. One definition of faith or belief is "to suppose or assume; understand." I believe that he has left town. I believe it will be sunny for our picnic tomorrow. When used in this way, a belief or faith may or may not be grounded in reality or based on facts or truth. It's simply your own personal assumption about something or someone.

This is not how the Bible uses the Word faith or belief. And we saw this in our epistle lesson today. Peter considered the possibility that those he wrote to may not believe him. He doesn't expect his readers to "Make the assumption / come to understanding that God is real and you are forgiven." He doesn't say, "Come one, all you gotta do is believe! Just take a wild leap even though there's no real basis for what we've taught!" No, instead he said, "Trust, believe, rely on this message because it came to you from first hand witnesses... and I'm one of them. We didn't make up these stories about Jesus, we saw them and are relating them to you exactly as they happened. And just as the O.T. scriptures didn't come about by man's wisdom or creation, but they were moved by the Holy Spirit... so also we. We convey to you only what God the Holy Spirit has revealed. Know the facts and know the ultimate source. Believe!"

So, to believe means to rely on fully on what God has said, done and demonstrated to be true. To believe in God means to trust God completely. To take God at his word and to organize your life accordingly. Faith is entrusting yourself to God instead of self.

I have a chair up here. If I trust this chair can do what it is supposed to do, I will sit. The chair now bears my weight and I don't. If I do NOT trust this chair I will continue to bear my own weight.

Now put this into the theological. If I do not trust God, I will continue to support my own spiritual weight. In order to try to get right with God, I will continue to try to rid myself of my own sins. I will continue to make myself better. I will continually self-improve. I will bear the responsibility for my salvation. I will rely on self for establishing a right relationship with God.

In contrast, the person who believe in the Lord, who trusts him, who relies on him for salvation, will place their full weight on the Lord. When God says he forgives, we believe, that is fully rely on that promise instead of trying to remove our own sin.

Today in our worship service, we have a positive and a negative example about faith. The negative example we won't focus on today, but I bet you're familiar enough with it. Thomas, one of the 12 disciples of Jesus, refused to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. He had Jesus' own promise that he would rise. He had the eye witness testimony of people he knew and trusted. But he refused to believe until he saw with his one eyes. There's a bad example of relying on God and his promises.

The positive example, though, comes to use in Genesis 15:1-6. The text begins...

After this, [Well, hold on... after "what." Abraham (called Abram because his name hadn't yet been changed by God), had just rescued his nephew Lot. In fact, he rescued the whole city from several kings that joined forces to conquer it. This was an amazing, courageous victory. Then, our text.]

the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."

Abraham hadn't been afraid of those kings. But God comes to him and says, "Don't be afraid." Afraid of what? Well, maybe the initial fear of receiving a vision from God. But in context, it seems there was something else.

But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

He had no son. Abraham was afraid. You see, God had made some great promises to Abraham. He had said earlier, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Well, how would God be able to do these things when he was childless?

Abraham believed God was powerful. And believed God was loving. He addressed him reverently as the "sovereign LORD." In the original language that title denotes his belief that God is in control of all things, and that God is the unchanging God of love and mercy.

And yet, he couldn't get over what reason and common sense were telling him. "I'm an old man. My wife is old. We have no children. A slave is going to inherit my estate." He's pleading with God, "I want to believe. I do trust. But I just don't see how you can possibly make good on what you've promised!"

We're a lot like Abraham, aren't we? God has made countless promises to each one of us here as well. Do you unquestioningly believe all that God promises you? Or do you also doubt God's ability to do what he promises? In Matthew 6:31-32 we read: "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them." God promises to take care of all your physical needs. Do you trust him, and ask him to do as he promises? Or do you doubt God? Do you think, "Lord, since I have no money, no job and no income, I **will not** have enough food or clothes. I don't see how you can keep your promise." It's easy for us to doubt, isn't it?

In Romans 8:28 we read, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." In **all things** God will work things out for our eternal good. Yet how often have you despaired in difficult times and doubted God's promise that he would work it out for you good?

In countless places in the Bible, God has promised that our sins are removed for Jesus' sake. God promises that he no longer counts our sins against us because Jesus paid the full penalty for our sins. And yet, how often don't we doubt our forgiveness? How often don't we say, "Yes, but God could never forgive the sin **I** committed."

God promises us eternal life in heaven with him. But how often do you doubt that heaven is a real place? How often do you doubt that you one day will actually be in heaven singing praises to God?

We can't be too quick to condemn Abram for his concern that God could not fulfill his promise. We regularly do the same thing! God makes some amazing promises that seem too good to be true. To us, it seems **impossible** for God to do what he promises. But look at how God dealt with Abram when he questioned God's ability to keep His promise.

Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

First, God repeats and clarifies his promise. "No, Abraham, when I promised you a son I didn't mean your slave. I meant a son from your own body." Don't miss the grace here! God didn't owe it to Abraham to repeat his promise. He could have been less patient and said, "You don't believe me? Well I'll find someone who will. My promises are off the table. You missed out because of your doubts." But he doesn't! He's patient. He repeats. He clarifies.

Then he does something else. He offers Abraham a visual aid so he's perfectly clear about what he's going to do. He shows him the stars in the sky. If you've ever been far from a big city and looked in the sky on a clear, dark night, you can imagine what Abram saw when he looked at the sky. There are so many stars, you would lose track if you tried to count them all. That's how many his offspring would be!

Do you see what else God was doing here? He was giving Abraham a reminder for the future as well. Every night after this... even 20 years later... when Abraham looked up, he'd be reminded of God's promise.

Friends, God does the same for us when we doubt his promises. If you've become a regular Bible reader, you've come to find out that God doesn't just make a promise **one** time in the Bible. Instead he **repeats** his promises again and again. As you read through Scriptures, you will find that God promises you **countless** times that he loves you. Again and again he tells you that you are forgiven. God repeatedly reassures you of his abiding presence. God assures you time and again that he hears and answers your every prayer. Why is God so repetitious when he speaks to us? Because repetition is the mother of learning! God knows that we are quick to forget his promises. He knows how fast we doubt his Word. Instead of giving up on us **slow** and **sinful** human creatures, he lovingly promises – not just once – but again and again, until finally, by the power of the Holy Spirit we **grasp** his promises and believe them.

Now, what happened:

Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

This is the first time in the Bible that we hear the word "believe." What did Abram believe? It simply says, "The Lord." He believed that God **would** give him many

descendants. He believed that one of those descendants would be his (and the world's) Savior from sin. All that the Lord had promised him, Abram believed. What happened when Abram believed the Lord? God credited this faith to him as righteousness.

What is righteousness? Maybe a simple definition of righteousness is this: "Being what God is looking for." If you are as God wants you to be, you are righteous. Abraham didn't do anything here. He simply took God at his word. He relied on God instead of self. He gave up his own notions and doubts and trusted God's Word and promise. And when Abraham gave up on self and rested on God, God counted Abraham as having what he was looking for. He was righteous in God's sight.

Friends, when we believe in the Lord, when we trust God... specifically, when it comes to being right with God and we trust that God accomplishes it through Jesus Christ his only Son. When we yield our salvation to him. When we trust it's all him and nothing of me. When we rest from our own labors and hand everything over to Jesus... God credits our faith as righteousness.

When we were still in Russia, I remember how Daniel's third birthday was coming up. Since we lived so far away, his grandparents sent his presents early to make sure they'd arrive in time. They did... three weeks early. We told them what they were and he of course wanted to open them right away. But I told him to wait. He would get them. But not now. For an almost three year, that three weeks must have seemed like an eternity. But he trusted his father. I said he would open them, and so he believed he would get to open them at the proper time.

Friends, trust God and his word and his promises. Even when you don't see with your eyes and his promises sometimes contradict what your reason is telling you. God keeps every one of them. Check out his track record in the Bible. See how he kept his promises to Abraham. He will keep his promises to you as well. Stop. Rest. Take a load off, and put it on God. He is faithful. He always keeps his Word. Amen.