

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

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Have you ever been promised something and then the promise wasn't kept? The greater the promise, the more it hurts us when there's no follow through on keeping the promise. In fact, every time someone makes a promise and breaks it, it destroys a little bit of our ability to trust people in general. If you can look back on your life and quickly come up with a number of promises that people made to you and then broke, I'm guessing you're a person that has trust issues. And I don't blame you! Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me... as the saying goes. When we've been hurt often enough by broken promises, we stop trusting people in general. It hurts too much to trust and to have that trust violated.

Our God makes promise after promise in Scripture. And they aren't small promises. They are huge, life-changing... even eternity-changing promises! Is it surprising that many hear those promises and say, "Well, those are nice promises and all, but you'll have to excuse me for being skeptical!" We know how often the axiom has borne true: "If the offer is too good to be true, it probably is."

Friends, my goal in the message today is simple: That you will leave today understanding and believing that this axiom does not apply to God. God does not deserve our skepticism, but faith. What God promises, he always does. You see, God has a track record, and that record says it all: Extreme promises made. Extreme promises kept.

Listen to today's sermon text in Romans 4:18-25.

18 Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." 19 Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. 20 Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, 21 being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. 22 This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." 23 The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, 24 but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. 25 He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

St. Paul tells us that God has power to do what he promises, and he points to Abraham as proof that God can do what he promises. Let's look at Abraham's life before he was the hero of faith. He grew up in the city of Ur in southeastern Iraq— at that time it was called Chaldea. Ur was one of the biggest cities of its time. Abraham lived there among the people— people who worshiped other gods. The Bible tells us that Abraham's family "lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods" (Joshua 24:2). It would have been very easy for Abraham to enjoy life in the big city of Ur. But God called him to leave. So he packed up and moved to a place called Haran. There, God called him to move again to go to a place God would show him— a great unknown. And when Abraham got there, he found a land that was even less civilized, a land

already filled with people. Once he got there, God made an extreme promise to Abraham: this land would be his. We often think of Abraham as a hero of faith, but we seldom think of how God's commands and promises must have sounded to him. Would they have sounded attractive? Reasonable? Comfortable? Certainly not! They would have sounded crazy. Unreasonable. Like something nobody would want to do. And on top of these God is connecting all of these promises to Abraham's descendants— and he and Sarah had no children! Abraham was 75 when he got to this land, and his wife was 65. God is making an extreme promise— a seemingly impossible promise— and as time goes on, the promise seems to be getting more and more impossible. At the point when it seems most impossible, *that's* when God shows his power and keeps the promise.

You see, faith is not a matter of inner strength. It's not that at all. It is a matter of realizing your own weakness, and fully relying on God alone. Did you get that? It's worth repeating.

Listen: **Faith is a matter of realizing your own weakness, and fully relying on God alone.**

Our lesson begins, "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed." That means that any hope Abraham had in himself, he had to abandon. With less faith, Abraham may have concluded: "Maybe my herds will increase here and Sarah and I will enjoy my wealth— maybe that's the best I can hope for." That idea he had to forget. At one point because of a weak faith, he *did* think: "Maybe God will bless me with the child of my maidservant." And he actually did take Sarah's maidservant as his wife and had a child. But this was not God's plan. If it was, we could hardly call this an extreme fulfillment of an extreme promise.

God had other plans, and he told Abraham once again the extreme promise. And when he did, Sarah laughed. He said, "In a year, Sarah will have a son." "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed." He had to throw out the hopes he had for himself, and listen to the plan and promise of God. Abraham learned again and again that he couldn't have faith in himself. Abraham's plans were too small, anyway. It was God's promise that he was to believe in. It was God's promise that has power. Abraham didn't believe in himself or in his own power. St. Paul would later write about having "no confidence in the flesh" but considering everything about himself a loss for the sake of Christ (See Philippians 3:3ff).

Sometimes God shows us that our faith in ourselves is faulty or misplaced. When we are overly proud of ourselves, or take pride in the things we have, God steps back and lets us see what happens when we put our faith in ourselves or our things. Think of all the things people worry about. The price of gas. The price of housing. Your retirement plan. Your health. Worry is nothing more than taking the full burden of life into your own hands and mulling over it and worrying about how you are going to fix the problem, or wondering what is going to happen next. And when you hold the burden in your own hands, it gets heavier. When you try a solution that isn't in line with God's command or promise, it gets heavier. Abraham knew that well. He decided to have a child with his maidservant and thought that was how he could have descendants. But God said no. Abraham's idea of a solution ended up being a heartache for everyone— for himself, for Sarah, for the maidservant, and for his son Ishmael. Abraham learned to think no longer about what he could do. He could just mess things up worse. He learned to think about what God promised to do. Listen: All of us, need to stop thinking only "What is my plan?" But to ask, "What is God's plan for me? How do I fit into his plans? How can I use the gifts he gave me?" and also, to remember... "What is God's promise to me?"

Yes, they are extreme promises! Listen to some of them: Never to leave me or forsake me (Hebrews 13:5). ... to work all things for my good, even when I can't see the good (Romans 8:28). ... to forgive my sins through Christ and call me his own, even when I feel lost or alone. ... for me to listen to his voice and follow, even when you and I think our own ideas seem better.

Faith is a conviction based on God's promise alone. Abraham heard the promises of God. Promises about the land. Promises about descendants being as numerous as the stars of the sky and filling the land. And then there were two promises different from all the others. "I am your shield and your great reward" (Genesis 15:1). And "Through your offspring all nations of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 22:18). The promise of the land was really a promise about the land on which the Savior would walk. The promise about the descendants was a promise about the family from which the Savior would come. The promises about the shield, reward, and an offspring who would bless the world were promises about Jesus. And Abraham believed the promise, and "it was credited to him as righteousness." That means that God looked at Abraham and *considered* him as perfect and holy— not because Abraham *was* perfect and holy, but because *God* was, and Abraham trusted him. God's extreme promise tears down the wall that sin puts up. God's extreme promise brings us near to him. For Abraham and for us, *Jesus Christ is the promise*. Forgiveness is the promise. Renewal is the promise. The Bible tells us that these words were written for us, too, that it is credited as righteousness. We are counted as righteous by God because of Jesus— Jesus who lived, died and rose. Abraham wasn't perfect. Neither are we. But Jesus was and is. Abraham was just a man in the ancient world, living in the big city. God gave him an extreme promise, and that promise transformed his life. He went where he never thought he would go. He did what he never thought he could do. Because it was the power of God's promise at work in him.

Conclusion: We have been given extreme promises of God, too. Like Abraham, we aren't alone in this world, even though it seems we are. We aren't alone because God counts us as his friends. Like Abraham, God counts us righteous, not because we are, but because of his promise— a promise that also makes a change in us— a change that moves us to hope against hope, not to waver in faith, because God has extreme power to keep his extreme promises. Whatever we face, whatever we fear, we face it with our God, our Savior Jesus, who has said he will never leave us.

Amen.