

God's amazing promises, then and now

Message for Sunday, October 10, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Genesis 15:5-6; Romans 4:1-5

Listen, I've got to tell you this exciting news! Last week I got an email from someone in Nigeria. I didn't know her, but she said that a mutual friend told her about me, and that I was entirely trustworthy. Her husband was the president of a bank, where the country's political leaders did their business. There was a lot of corruption going on, with millions being siphoned out of government accounts. The bank president arranged it so that he robbed from the robbers, secretly taking some of their loot for himself. Over the years, he collected twenty million dollars this way. But he has recently died, and she needs to get the money and herself out of the country immediately, before the scam is detected.

This is where I come in. She asked if I would please give her access to my bank account, so that she can transfer the money into my account? Then she'll fly over here, collect her money from me, and start a new life here in Canada. My reward for making this possible will be a cool five million dollars.

Five million bucks for doing almost nothing? This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!! So on Thursday I gave her my account information and password. When I go to the bank on Monday, there will be a big surprise waiting for me!!

Question: how many of you have heard about this? Most of you who use the internet and have email know what I'm talking about. On average, I get about one of these offers per week. I didn't really do it. But many people have done exactly what I described, and I'm sure you can guess what was the big surprise they found when they went to their bank on Monday morning: their account had been emptied.

We've all heard the saying, "If it's too good to be true, it probably isn't." But five million dollars is a mighty big temptation, and many have fallen for it.

The apostle Paul, in writing his letter to the Romans, is telling about the good news of forgiveness and salvation available through Jesus Christ. To many people, he comes across as the Nigerian widow: no way! – it's too good to be true.

This was especially so for many Jewish people. As they listened to Paul's letter being read aloud, they would be thinking, "What you are saying is totally new. It is

contrary to everything we have been taught to believe. We believe those who obey the Law are righteous in God's sight, and that those who break the Law are condemned by God. But you are saying that people are righteous in God's sight just because they put their faith in this Jesus. On what basis do you claim this heresy is from God?"

Paul is a wise teacher. He is teaching about faith. But faith is an abstract idea, and human minds find abstract ideas very hard to grasp. It is so much easier to see something happening, than to think about abstract ideas. (Which do you find easier to read: a mystery novel or a math textbook?) So Paul says, in effect, "If you want to see what faith is like in action, look at Abraham."

Romans 4:1-5, New Living Translation:

Abraham was, humanly speaking, the founder of our Jewish nation. What were his experiences concerning this question of being saved by faith? Was it because of his good deeds that God accepted him? If so, he would have had something to boast about. But from God's point of view Abraham had no basis at all for pride. For the Scriptures tell us, "Abraham believed God, so God declared him to be righteous."

When people work, their wages are not a gift. Workers earn what they receive. But people are declared righteous because of their faith, not because of their work.

Romans 4:3 (the underlined part above) is a direct quote from Genesis 15, the chapter we're reading today. It's from the section which tells about God making a promise to Abram and Sarai.

Genesis 15:5, New Living Translation:

Then the Lord brought Abram outside beneath the night sky and told him, "Look up into the heavens and count the stars if you can. Your descendants will be like that—too many to count!"

This was when Abraham and Sarah didn't have any children. Abraham's response was to put his faith in God (and this next verse is what Romans 4:3 quotes):

Genesis 15:6, New Living Translation:

Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord declared him righteous because of his faith.

It was no accident that Paul chose Abraham as his example. Abraham was the father of the Jewish nation. If Paul can show that Abraham was righteous in God's sight because of Abraham's faith (rather than by following the Law), he has made his point.

I could paraphrase Paul this way: “What really pleases God is when people put their faith in him, trust him. Abraham is the perfect example of this. God was pleased with Abraham because Abraham believed God, and based his whole life on that faith. In fact, Abraham *couldn't* please God by following the Law, because God didn't give him any Law until many years later.”

One of the things that Abraham and Sarah did as a result of their faith in God, was to move away from home, and journey far away to a new land God would give them. They trusted God, and did it. We looked at that way back in Genesis 12. But let's think about that again.

Compare this to the first astronaut going up in space. That took a lot of faith, to get into a metal canister which will be blasted into outer space. But this is scientific faith. Before that first astronaut ever got aboard a rocket ship, scientists had done careful calculations of the force of gravity, the thrusting power of the fuel, the amount of oxygen they needed to carry on board, and a million other calculations. Then they sent animals into orbit. Then still more people went over all those calculations again, to double check and make sure they were right. Then still more did it all a third time. Only when they were absolutely sure it was safe, did they put a human aboard a rocket ship. Still, it was something that had never been done before; there were so many things that could go wrong. But the astronaut went ahead and did it anyway.

Abraham and Sarah had nothing like that. They had no way of calculating the distance they would travel, or how much food they would need. They didn't even know where they were going! Yet they went anyway. They simply trusted what God had said. This is Biblical faith.

Do you see the difference between believing something, and having faith? Believing is purely a mental thing. But faith is living out that belief, putting it into practice.

Some years ago the famous daredevil Blondin was walking on a tightrope stretched above the river just below Niagara Falls. Of course thousands of people came to watch. Blondin walked across the river and back. People applauded. Then he rolled a wheelbarrow across and back. People shouted. Next he put 200 pounds of sandbags in the wheelbarrow, and walked across and back with it. People cheered.

Then he motioned for silence. He said to the crowd, “How many of you believe I can roll a person across in this wheelbarrow?” The crowd went wild! One man in

front was very excited. He shouted louder than anyone that the daredevil could do it.

So Blondin pointed to his fan in the front and said, “Then get in, and let's go do it.” Well, you couldn't see the man for the dust kicked up by his heels!

He believed in Blondin; he really did, with all sincerity. But he didn't have faith in Blondin. He wasn't willing to live by his belief.

Many people believe:

- they know about Jesus
- they believe that Jesus died for them
- they believe in God
- they say that they follow Jesus.

But they have never gotten in the wheelbarrow. They have never committed and surrendered themselves to Christ completely, one hundred percent.

What about you? Where are you in your faith journey? Where would you like to be? I encourage you to take that step of faith — that leap of faith — which says, “Lord, I don't know where you're going to lead me, but there is nowhere else I'd rather be than following you.”

Theme for today: “You believe there is one God. Good! But the demons believe that, too, and they tremble with fear. You foolish person! Must you be shown that faith that does nothing is worth nothing? [James 2:19-20]”