

When it looks impossible, God still has a plan

Message for Sunday, November 14, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Genesis 18:1-15

NOTE: This sermon is in two parts, completely unrelated to each other. So I preached the first part early in the service, and the second part later.

1) You're never too old for God to use

Some people think the reason God waited so long before fulfilling the promise was to make it absolutely plain that this was a God thing. As Hebrews 11:12, puts it, Abraham was "as good as dead."

"As good as dead," that is, as the world sees and values people. You lose your job when you're fifty, and find that no one wants you. Your years of experience don't count for much.

But with God, everything is turned upside down! He was able to this couple in their nineties to bring a blessing to the world. What that says to me is that you are never too old for God to use.

One of my favourite people was a woman I met when I was a student minister. She was ninety-two years old, and still living in her own home. I visited her several times over that summer. Then she had a bad fall, and died shortly after. But here's the part I love: she fell out of the tree where she had climbed to pick apples! Her motto, which she said to me every time I saw her, was "I'd rather wear out than rust out."

Charles McCoy was the pastor of a Baptist church in Oyster Bay, New York, when at age 72 his denomination required him to retire. They had a place for him to live, a retirement home in Florida. A life-long bachelor, he had cared for his mother as long as she lived. In his spare time he had earned seven university degrees, including two Ph.D. degrees. But now, at 72, he was being forced out of the pastorate because he was considered too old.

He was depressed. "I just lay on my bed thinking that my life's over, and I haven't really done anything yet. I've been pastor of this church for so many years and nobody really wants me much—what have I done for Christ? I've spent an awful lot of time working for degrees, but what does that count for? I haven't won very many for the Lord."

A week later he met a Christian pastor from India, and on impulse asked him to preach in his church. After the

service the Indian brother asked him matter-of-factly to return the favour. Since he had preached for McCoy, would McCoy come to India and preach for him? McCoy told him that he was being forced to retire and move into a home for the elderly down in Florida. But the Indian insisted, informing him that where he came from, people respected a man when his hair turns white. Would he come?

McCoy prayed about it and decided to go. The members of his church were aghast. The young chairman of his deacon board summed up the congregation's attitude: "What if you die in India?" I love McCoy's answer. He told him he reckoned that "it's just as close to heaven from India as it is from Oyster Bay."

He sold or gave away most of his belongings, put what was left in a trunk, and booked a one-way passage to India. It was his first trip out of the United States.

When he arrived in Bombay, he discovered to his horror that his trunk was lost. All he had were the clothes on his back, his wallet, his passport, and the address of missionaries in Bombay he had clipped from a missionary magazine before he left. He asked for directions, got on a bus, and headed for their house. When he got there, he discovered that while he was on the streetcar his wallet and passport had been stolen! All he had in the world was the piece of paper still in his hand with the address he was looking for.

When he knocked on the door of the missionaries' house, he was greeted with a polite smile and a blank look. Not only were they not expecting him, but the man who had invited him to India was still in the U.S. and would probably remain there indefinitely.

What was he going to do now? Unperturbed, McCoy told them he had come to preach and that he would try to make an appointment with the mayor of Bombay the next day. The missionaries warned him that the mayor was very busy and that in all the years they had been missionaries there, they had never been granted an appointment with him.

Nevertheless, McCoy set out for the mayor's office the next day. When the mayor's secretary gave him McCoy's business card, listing all his degrees, he thought McCoy must not be merely a Christian pastor, but someone much more important. Not only did he get an appointment, but the mayor held a tea in his honour, and invited many of the city's influential officials.

Old Dr. McCoy was able to preach to these leaders for half an hour. Among them was the director of India's West Point, the National Defence Academy at Poona. He was so impressed at what he heard that he invited

McCoy to come and speak to his officers in training. He was invited back four times!

When word got around that this newcomer had spoken with so many officials, he started getting invited to all kinds of places. Thus began a brand-new ministry for Charles McCoy. Before he died at age 88, this dauntless old man circled the globe preaching the gospel. There is a church in Calcutta today because of his preaching, and a thriving band of Christians in Hong Kong because of his faithful ministry. He never had more than enough money to get him to the next place he needed to go. He died one afternoon in a hotel in Calcutta, resting for a meeting he was to preach at that evening.

The point: don't let anyone say you're too old to do anything. God can still use you, perhaps in ways you can't even imagine.

2) Which would you rather follow: wishful thinking or solid promises?

The whole story of Abraham and Sarah is about God making promises, and people believing them. God promised to lead Abraham and Sarah to a new land, and they believed him. And so it happened.

God also promised that they would have a child, and from this child would arise a great nation. The first time that promise was made, back in chapter 12, Abraham was 75 years old.

Genesis 12:1-4, New International Version:

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. 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."

So Abram left, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran.

Back in chapter 17, we got an update on his age:

Genesis 17:24, New International Version:

Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised.

Twenty-four years have passed since the promise was given. And Abraham and Sarah still haven't had a child. They had pretty well given up any hope of ever having a

child. After all, who ever heard of a couple that old having a child?

And so they doubted God. What does it mean, to doubt God? It means one of two things, or perhaps even both:

- It means you think God doesn't tell the truth. God makes promises, then doesn't keep his word.
- It means you think God does not have the ability to do what he says he will do.

Or, maybe — and this is very common in the world today — you think the whole God idea is nice, but it's not real. This is common even in churches. Craig Groeschel calls this being a "practical atheist": someone who says they believe in God, yet they live from day to day as if there is no God, as if they are entirely on their own. Can you see yourself in that picture?

Anyway, back to doubting God. What does the Bible have to say about God's truthfulness and ability?

Right here in this chapter we get the answer from the angel speaking on behalf of God.

Genesis 18:14, Today's English Version:

"Is anything too hard for the Lord? As I said, nine months from now I will return, and Sarah will have a son."

This is just like the angel Gabriel who spoke with Mary the mother of Jesus.

Luke 1:37, New International Version:

"For nothing is impossible with God."

As for God's truthfulness, this verse puts it succinctly.

Psalms 33:4, New International Version:

For the word of the Lord is right and true; he is faithful in all he does.

Friends, do not fear. What God has said, God will do.

Now there is one important thing to remember here: there's a difference between what God has promised, and what we wish for.

People tend to wish for good health; God doesn't say that, but instead promises to be with us through all our trials.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4, New Living Translation:

All praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the source of every mercy and the God who comforts us. He comforts us in all our troubles so

that we can comfort others. When others are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.

Most people would like to have enough money to feel secure about their future, but God says, “Don’t trust money; I am your security.”

Matthew 6:24, 33, New International Version:

“No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and Money... But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

A lot of people lose their faith because they had believed in their wishes, rather than in God’s promises.

I want to speak right now to you — not to the person next to you, nor the person 2 rows behind you, but to you. What problems are you facing in life?

- Addiction? God can deliver you!
- A child who has taken the wrong path in life? Nothing is too hard for God!
- Discouragement over an unbelieving spouse? God is faithful!
- Despair over debt? Everything is possible with God.
- Bitterness over old wounds? God can mend the broken heart and give you the strength to forgive.
- Feeling overwhelmed and out of control? God is able to meet your needs.
- Your marriage is hopeless and you’re ready to quit? The God who created us with a desire for love can restore the bond.

Do you see the importance of this passage for your everyday living? Instead of seeing only the impossible situation, turn around and see that God is right there with you, ready to give you the help you need.

Theme for today: You just did something stupid and embarrassing, but not dangerous. What’s the difference between someone laughing *at* you and someone and laughing *with* you? The difference is you being humble enough to laugh at yourself. I wonder if God laughs with us at our foibles. Does God have a sense of humour? Does God tell jokes? (Some people say “Yes, that’s why we have mosquitoes.”) The point is, we can enjoy God as well as worship God. Nehemiah 8:10 says, “The joy of the Lord is your strength.”