

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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AGAINST ALL HOPE

Romans 4:18-25

The opposite of hope is ... what? It is hopelessness, right? The opposite of hope is hopelessness. To be full of hope (or hope-full) and to be void of hope are polar opposites. The antithesis of hope is utter, total despair. When all hope is lost, what is there to hold onto?

Theologian Emil Brunner put it this way: “What oxygen is to the lungs, such is hope to the meaning of life.” In other words, hope is the oxygen of our souls. Hope is what enables our souls to keep breathing.

A writer named Jon Bloom says essentially the same thing. “In a world of tribulation,” he says, “hope (naturally) drains away. Hope is to our soul what energy is to our bodies... Our souls must have hope to keep going, just as our bodies must have energy to keep going.” He goes on to say that when you have hope, you can endure a lot of adversity. When you have hope, you can keep going in the midst of pain and loss. You can keep going in the midst of circumstances you wish were much different.

Bloom then asks the logical question: “When our souls need hope, what do we feed them?” If we are wise, he says, “we feed them promises – *God’s* promises of a “future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11). Hopeful promises are true soul food” (emphasis added). From there he goes on to connect the dots between hope and faith: “If (God’s) promises are soul food and hope is soul energy, then faith is how the soul eats and digests. Faith is the confidence we have that God’s promises are trustworthy.” It is, as Hebrews 11:1 tells us, “the assurance of what we hope for.” “Faith,” Bloom says, “eats and digests God’s promises, and this produces hope.”

The reason we have confidence (or faith) that God’s promises are trustworthy is because God has shown us that He Himself is trustworthy. We have confidence (or faith) that God’s promises are true because we know that God’s word is true, and that what God says, He will do. In His time.

In the darkest hour, when the world seems to be falling apart, when you feel overwhelmed with heartache or grief, there is still a reason for hope, as we saw last Sunday in our look at the lament of the psalm writer in Psalms 42 and 43. In the bleakness of his own circumstances and the distress of his soul, the psalm writer preached the gospel of hope to himself. It was not a gospel of *hope in hope*, as if hope alone, disconnected from reality, would do any good. It was, instead, the gospel of *hope in God* – the God who created all things and sustains all things “by the power of His word” (Hebrews 1:3), the God who is from everlasting to everlasting (Psalm 90:1), the God who loves and cares for us, the God who, yes, has good and gracious plans for each of us, *including you*, plans to give you “hope and a future,” a future that is secure with Him. Secure *in* Him. Secure in His unchanging love.

Circumstances change, but God does not. Circumstances change, but God's love for you does not.

The message the psalm writer preached to himself was both simple and profound:

“Put your hope in God, (O my soul),
for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God.”
(Psalm 42:5, 11, 43:5)

Maybe, like the psalmist, you need to be reminded, or you need to remind yourself, to “put your hope in God.” Whatever your circumstances, put your hope in God, for His promises are true, and He will do what He says. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, He is with you (Psalm 23:4). And, like Paul, I am confident that He who began His good work in you – in *your* life – will bring it to “a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears” (Philippians 1:6, *The Message*).

But – listen – doesn't it seem sometimes that God is taking forever to do what He has promised to do? Doesn't it seem that He is taking forever to get things done? Don't you wish sometimes that God would just hurry up already? Isn't it hard to hold onto hope when it seems like nothing is happening? In times like that, don't you wonder if what you hope for will ever happen?

Abraham and Sarah sure knew what it is like. Paul turns the spotlight on them – on Abraham, especially – in Romans 4, where he presents Abraham, the founding father of the Jewish nation, as the prime example of justification (or salvation) by faith alone, not by works. After laying out the biblical doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in the person and work of Jesus Christ alone in Romans 3:21-26 – what one esteemed New Testament scholar (Leon Morris) has called the most important paragraph ever written – Paul goes on in Romans 4 to explain how the experience of Abraham, this patriarch of the Jewish people who is one of the most revered men in all of history, illustrates and confirms the principle of justification – being declared righteous in the sight of God – not by good works or a godly character, but through faith and faith alone.

Abraham, of course, is one of the central figures in the Bible as a whole. The story of his life is the main focus of Genesis 12-25. His shadow, though, looms large throughout the Bible as a whole, and throughout the history of the Jewish people, who trace their ancestry back to this one man. To Abraham and his wife Sarah.

Abraham was originally “Abram,” and Sarah's name was originally “Sarai.” Abram is first introduced at the end of Genesis 11, where we read that he was the son of Terah, and the brother of Nahor and Haran (Genesis 11:26, 27). Sarai, his wife, was barren. She was unable to bear children, which was, no doubt, a source of great grief to both Sarai and Abram. But God had plans for them it took them a long time to understand.

Originally from Ur of the Chaldees, Abram and Sarai set out with Abram's father Terah and his (Abram's) nephew Lot to go to the land of Canaan. But they only went part way. When

they came to Haran, in present-day Syria, they settled there (Genesis 11:31). But, as you know if you know the story of Abraham (if you're not familiar with it, I urge you to read it in Genesis 12-25; it is a fascinating story), you know that the Lord spoke to Abram, promised to bless him to be a blessing, and instructed Abram to "leave (his) country, (his) people, and (his) father's household" and to go to the land the Lord would show him. So Abram did what the Lord told him to do. He left Haran, not knowing where he was going. The Lord led him to Canaan. This took place, the Bible says, when Abram was 75 years old (Genesis 12:1-3). In the "chronicles of faith" found in Hebrews 11, we read: "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance" – the land of Canaan – "obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country" (Hebrews 11:8-9).

Sometime after arriving in Canaan, the Lord spoke to Abram again and promised to give him a son, and descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens (Genesis 15:4-5). Abram's response was a defining moment in his life, with ripple effects that continue to this day, ripple effects that touch your life and mine. How did Abram respond? Genesis 15:6 says: "Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness." He believed God. He trusted God. He accepted what the Lord said to him as true. And the Lord accepted him. On the basis of his faith, the Lord accepted Abram and declared him righteous in His sight.

Abram, remember, was at least 75 years old when he received this promise from the Lord – the promise of a son, and a line of descendants that would become a great nation. God promised. Abram believed. And then ... nothing happened. For another decade. Neither Abram nor Sarai were getting any younger. Sarai's biological clock had already stopped clicking. So, what to do? When it seemed to Sarai that God wasn't doing anything and perhaps needed a little help, she decided to take matters into her own hands, in a manner of speaking, and she proposed to Abram that he have a child through her maidservant Hagar. Abram agreed and slept with Hagar, who became pregnant and gave birth to a son named Ishmael. At the age of 86, Abram had become a father at last (Genesis 16:1-4, 15-16).

But, as you know if you know the story, the birth of Ishmael was not the fulfillment of God's plan for Abram. Thirteen years later, when Abram was 99, the Lord appeared to Abram and spoke to him again. God gave him a new name – Abraham, which means "father of many nations" (Genesis 17:5). He gave Sarai a new name, too. "As for Sarai your wife," the Lord said, "you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah" (17:15). And as if to say, "Oh, by the way," the Lord said this to Abraham about Sarah: "I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her." Moments later, the Lord said it again: "(Y)our wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac" (17:16, 19).

Abraham's reaction was to laugh, not out loud but to himself (17:17). He thought to himself: After all these years? At the age of one hundred? And Sarah, at the age of ninety?

Sarah would laugh, too, though she denied it, when the Lord visited Abraham again in Genesis 18, repeating the promise of a son through Sarah. She overheard the Lord say to Abraham: "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son" (18:10). Sarah laughed when she heard this. Her reaction, in today's vernacular,

would be something like “Yeah right.” But God said: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (18:14) Is anything too hard for God? We could make an endless list of things that are impossible from a human perspective. But things that are impossible for us are “Him-possible” with God. Including such things as a virgin becoming pregnant and bearing the Son of God in flesh and blood. As the angel Gabriel said to Mary, “Nothing is impossible with God” (Luke 1:37). Nothing. Which also includes enabling an old man like Abraham, whose body was “as good as dead,” and an old woman like Sarah, who had endured decades of infertility (Romans 4:19), to become parents long after all human hope had died.

Is anything too hard for the Lord? Hundreds of years before Paul wrote to the Romans, Jeremiah said: “Ah, Sovereign Lord, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for You.” (Jeremiah 32:17) Nothing.

Even bringing the dead back to life is not too hard for God. Abraham believed this. Go back with me once again to Hebrews 11 and the “chronicles of faith:” “By 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. And 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” (Hebrews 11:11-12).

But that is not all. Hebrews 11 continues: “By 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” – can you imagine being asked to do something like this? – “even though God has said to him, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death” (11:17-19). Is anything too hard for God?

Paul says of Abraham, “Without weakening in his faith, he faced the facts, yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but strengthened in his faith, giving glory to God and being fully persuaded that God had power to do what He had promised.”

It seems to me that Paul, in his portrait of Abraham here, has glossed over a few details in Abraham’s life. It wasn’t always an onward and upward single line of movement in Abraham’s life. I appreciate what Chuck Swindoll says about this. He says, “As I read the story of Abraham and Sarah I see multiple examples of wobbly-legged faith. Yet God looked not so much at their faltering growth but at their ultimate destination.” If that’s true of Abraham and Sarah, isn’t it also true of us, that while we may become obsessed with our own faltering along the path of growth, God is looking at our ultimate destination? Swindoll says, “From our perspective, while they (Abraham and Sarah) wavered a lot along the way, the Lord looks instead at the fact that they arrived, despite the presence of natural hindrances. They may have laughed, but that laughter did not nullify their trust. The aging couple took full account of their decaying bodies and waning sexual potency as they, together, chose to believe God. Despite the occasional setbacks, Abraham’s mind remained undivided – weak in human understanding but always trained on God and no other.”

That is, I think, how it is to be with us. Through it all, we see, Abraham believed God. Through it all Abraham held on to hope. Paul says, “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed.” The opposite of hope is hopelessness or despair. When I think of hopelessness or despair I think of someone like Louis Zamperini, the subject of Laura Hillenbrand’s biography *Unbroken*. Shot down over the Pacific in World War II, he survived for several weeks drifting in the ocean on a life raft until he had the good fortune (?) of being rescued and captured as a prisoner of war by the Japanese and tortured. Hopelessness. The hopelessness of being stranded at sea.

In Acts 27:20, Luke, writing about his experience traveling with Paul as Paul was on his way to Rome, describing the storm Luke says, “When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storms continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.” I can picture that in my mind’s eye. And the circumstances of Abraham and Sarah may have seemed to them much like being stranded in a storm at sea with no hope of being rescued. Except that Abraham and Sarah remembered the promise that God had given them. And so against all hope, even when everybody in the world would have said to them, “It’s hopeless. Move on,” Abraham believed. Abraham in hope believed.

God fulfilled His promise to Abraham, didn’t he? And what we celebrate in this season is not merely the faith of Abraham, but we celebrate the fact that God who is faithful provided for the seed of Abraham to be born to a virgin named Mary. In His coming and living among us and suffering and dying for us and being raised from the dead, exalted, sent to heaven, His coming and the promise of His coming again give us a hope to hold onto. Against all hope. Like Abraham may we believe, may we be fully persuaded that God has the power to do what He has promised. And He will. Lord, let it be so. Come Lord Jesus.