

God had promised and Abraham had believed. “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” And Abraham, taking God at his word, packed up lock, stock, and barrel, and headed into the unknown. Perhaps, the most appealing of the three promises of posterity, fame, and blessing for Abraham and Sarah was the first. A “great nation” had to begin with the birth of at least one child, and Abraham and Sarah were and had been childless. In fact, the birth of a child was key to the fulfillment of the promise. The days and the months and the years passed, though, and nothing changed. Once again, the Lord appeared to Abraham and promised: “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward will be very great.” This time Abram, as he was still known, objected: “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? . . . You have given me no offspring, and a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” You promised, Abraham said, but you have not kept your word. Pretty cheeky of him, don’t you think? But that’s where he was. God had let him down.

We, you and I, know about broken promises too. You promised to be “faithful and loving in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live,” and you meant it, meant it from the depths of your being and you thought the one who had looked into your eyes and repeated the same words meant it too, and maybe he did at the moment, but he did not keep the promise, and the betrayal broke your heart. The offer from the new company was a sweet one—a very attractive salary and benefits, generous relocation expense, and the possibility of advancement in your career. You jumped at the opportunity, eager to embrace a new future, moved wife and children half-way across the country, and less than a year into the position you were “down-sized” right out of a job, leaving you up the proverbial creek without a paddle. Jesus promised us: “I will be with you always, even to the close of the age,” but there are times when you call and call and call, and, for the life of you, he seems nowhere to be found.

The text doesn’t tell us anything about what Abraham felt as he and the Lord carried on this conversation. Anger, disappointment, disbelief? That much and more, I imagine. However he felt, he was at least honest with the Lord, and the Lord, for his part, responded to the complaint not with apologies or with indignation as one might expect, but, paradoxically, with a reaffirmation of the promise. No, Eliezer “shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue will be your heir.” And the Lord led him out of his tent into the dark of the night and said: Count the stars, if you can. “So shall your descendants be. And Abraham believed the Lord, believed him all over again. P. T. Barnum once said that “there is a sucker born every minute,” but for Abraham this was something far different than being taken in by the lure of something you want more than life itself; this was faith; this was taking God, once more, at his word. “And he believed the Lord,” Genesis tells us, all over again he believed. Faith is saying *yes* to God, trusting God to be faithful to his word. It is standing firm.

St. Paul called the Christians at Philippi to stand firm in their faith as well. They too had embraced the promise of a new life and future, but the promise was slow in being fulfilled, and life was tough. "Our citizenship," Paul had told them, "is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself." But even a cursory glance around made them wonder if anything was subject to Christ. They had expected him, looked daily for him, and he had not come. In the meantime their lives had not gotten any better, if anything more difficult. There was no lack of opposition from the larger community, and while the passage doesn't state the consequences for them, it is safe to assume that some of them, at least, if not many of them lost friends, were ostracized by family, and suffered financially because of their faith. They were tempted, sorely tempted, to back away from the promise, to moderate their hope. And all that Paul had to offer as encouragement not to do that was this admonition: "My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord . . ." Stand firm.

When you say *yes* to God, to Jesus, there is no guarantee that things in life will fall into place or that the way before you will be smooth and uncomplicated. In fact, if anything, you can count on it, at least in some respects, becoming more difficult. If our citizenship is indeed in heaven, as Paul told the Philippians, then it is inevitable that we will find ourselves, at times at least, at odds with the values and standards of this world. We live with a different perspective on the world, our place in it and our role. For us the one who wins is not the one who dies with the most toys, but the one who has learned and practiced the grace of generosity. For us, the highest honor is not in being the one who is served, but being the one who is graced to serve others. For us it is not the sweet taste of revenge that constitutes victory, but the grace to forgive those who have harmed us. The going may sometimes be difficult, but what we anticipate is that in the end good will triumph over evil, truth will tower over falsehood, love will conquer hate, and justice will prevail, not because that is how humanity is at its best, but because that is how God is.

That we can understand; that we can deal with. What we can't understand are the things that make us question the veracity of the promise-maker. You watch as a neighbor, the mother of little children, dies of cancer. A neighborhood teenager, a good kid, dies in a freak accident on his motorcycle. The phone rings in the middle of the night, rudely waking you with news that turns your life upside down and inside out. You pray for healing, but healing does not come. You are accused of a wrong, and people you thought you could always depend on, people who really *know* you assume you are guilty. You pray for reconciliation with one you love, but the wall of separation remains rock solid. You do what is right and are punished for it. Maybe it is just wishful thinking?

When the going gets tough; when the way becomes confusing; when doubt casts its dark shadow, you could, I imagine, just give up and walk away. In truth, I suppose, you can always give up and walk away, but where would you go? Once, as many in the

crowd who followed him were doing just that, Jesus asked his disciples: “Do you wish to go away also?” As if, he wouldn’t be surprised if they said “yes.” And it was Peter who answered for them all: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” When you have said *yes* to God in Christ, your life really does change and somewhere along the way you realize that even though life with him does not always make sense, even though life with him can sometimes be troubling and difficult, you can no longer imagine your life apart from him.

Faith, the kind of faith exemplified by Abraham that God reckoned as righteousness—the kind of faith God looks for from us—is the faith that trusts that the one whom you have believed and to whom you have given yourself, will never let you down or let you go and that ultimately in God’s good time, it will all make sense and the day will come when we see clearly and understand fully, even as we have been fully understood. In the meantime, we walk by faith and not by sight, trusting the one who has called us on the journey to see us through to the end. And he will.

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