

I think it is very likely that if you and I were to meet this very weekend and enter into a general conversation, probably many of you would say things like, "Well, I'm trying to live the Christian Life. I'm trying to be a good Christian." Now, is not that true? Some of us have probably used those very words. We may have talked with someone who is interested in Jesus too, and we have said that kind of thing. We don't wish to appear too holy or too saintly or too religious, so we tend to say "I'm trying to live the Christian Life." Maybe some of us feel we do not quite measure up to what the other person thinks a real Christian is, so we use that kind of wording, "Well, I'm doing the best I can to be the kind of Christian God wants me to be." You know that is like saying, "Well I'm trying to be an Irishman -- well I am! I'm really an American but I'm TRYING to be a good Irishman. I'm doing my best to be the best Irishman God want an Irishman to be." You know, it is a bit like that. All the trying in the world won't make you an Irishman if you are not one! Unless you are born an Irishman, all you can do is imitate the characteristics of those people. That is the only place TRYING will get.

Now, this is what nominal Christians do. Nominal Christians try to be Christians. They try to become a part of the Christian community so that God will perhaps accept them along with the crowd. They try to believe what Christians believe or they try to do what Christians do. But all the trying in the world will NOT make you a child of God if you are not BORN a child of God. All the trying in the world will only result in you being outwardly like a Christian -- but not inwardly. Really, what we have been saying is that becoming a Christian, or becoming a child of God, or coming into a personal relationship with the Person who made us, is not a matter of TRYING. It is not a matter of trying to do what human beings can do -- it is a matter of God doing what he has promised to do. That is the only way you can ever become a child of God -- if God does what he promised to do in your life. So what we are saying is there are "Christians", and then there are "Christians". There are "Israelites", and then there are "Israelites". The mark of the one is that they ARE and the mark of the other is that they TRY TO BE!

You will remember that we used the example that Paul gives in the Bible about how God promised Abraham thousands and thousands of descendants, -- -- and Abraham was 85 and his wife was 75, yet God promised, "I will give you a son and I will give you thousands and thousands of descendants." However, Abraham got the idea that he should try to bring about God's promises by himself, and he went to bed with Hagar, his wife's maid and they produced Ishmael. Now, Ishmael was the child of the flesh -- not because it was sexy, but because he was produced by human effort. Man and woman doing what they could do to bring about God's will. Then, you will remember, when Abraham was about 100 and Sarah was about 90, God gave them the gift of Isaac by miraculous birth even though Sarah was way beyond the age of child-bearing age. Isaac was called the "Child of Promise".

That is what real Christians are -- they are "Children of the Promise". They are children who have not come about by human effort -- not by their own effort to do what God wants them to do -- but by God doing a supernatural work in them. That is the basis of Isaac's life. That is the basis of the lives of those who are personally related to our Creator. It is God doing what he said he would do in our lives. That is the basis of our lives. What God alone could do was the basis of Isaac's

birth. This can be seen in Hebrews 11:11, "By faith Sarah received the power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven, and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore." That was the basis of Isaac's birth. Humanly speaking, there was no way that Isaac could have been born through human effort as Sarah was at that time 90 years of age. Isaac came into the world by God doing what he promised he would do. He promised that he would create in the womb of a woman who was nearly dead a new child. That is the basis of all God's work.

The two factors, human effort and God's work, are mutually exclusive. If you think you can do it by your own human effort, God will not be free to work. Only if there is absolutely no chance of it happening from a human point of view -- and only if you see that -- is God actually able to work. Now, here is why many of us end up nominal Christians. Many of us only accept those Bible commandments that we can obey by our own power. In other words, look at Matthew 5:21, "You have heard it was said to the men of old 'you shall not kill, and he who kills shall be liable to judgment.'" I think probably all of us accept this because many of us might have wanted to kill our wives -- but we did not. Few of us have seriously thought of murder, so we are able to accept this commandment because we are able to keep it by our own efforts. However, the next commandment we ignore or rationalize, "But I say to you, anyone who is angry with his brother is liable of judgment." We rationalize that one away. In other words, many of us end up nominal Christians because we accept only the commandments that a self-disciplined theist like Socrates could obey.

It is the same if you go down to Matthew 5:27, "You have heard that, 'you shall not commit adultery.'" Many of us can accept this because by self-effort we can avoid committing adultery. But we rationalize away the next verse, "Whoever looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." In other words, we do the same as Abraham. We do what we are able to do by human effort. That is why we continue to be nominal Christians all our lives -- always trying to be good Christians. Always trying to be what God wants us to be means that we end up being phony. We live a life that is alien to us, a life that does not come naturally or spontaneously.

We get in that position because we refuse to see the kind of life that God does actually require of us. For example, there are some verses that we completely ignore, such as Galatians 5:19, "Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, sensuousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party-spirit, drunkenness, carousing, and the like." We read that far and say, "We are free of sorcery, and now that a certain person is not present, of party-spirit" -- and so we go on. We do not seem to see the next verse, "I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall NOT inherit the kingdom of God." We just ignore them even though our own lives are constantly plagued by envy and jealousy -- to say nothing of anger and selfishness. That is how many of us remain nominal Christians.

The only way to become a child of God is to see that you cannot do it. You cannot be free from anger and jealousy through your own human effort. You cannot produce the kind of life that is free totally from lust, anger, and jealousy. When you realise this then that is the beginning of wisdom and the beginning of moving near to the position where God can do something for you -- because that is what the Father has been saying all along. So then you come to the place where you look at Jesus' life -- which was free from any impurity, free from any uncleanness -- and you realise you cannot be like that and that there is nothing good in you and you have no ability to be like that -- then you have come to the place where God can do something for you. When you come to the place where you agree with God that you are thoroughly rotten, and the only remedy is to destroy you and start all

over again, then God can make his promise real in you. That promise is found in Galatians 4:6, and it is the center of the "New Birth". "And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" That is what "New Birth" is -- that Spirit in you will then spontaneously want to be kindly, patient, and loving.

So the beginning of the Christian life is the same as the beginning of Isaac's life, that is, a supernatural new birth -- and that is the only place to start. So when you see the laws of God in the Scripture, don't draw back from them and rationalize them away. Look at them plainly and see that you are not like that. The only way to become like that is to allow God to make you like that. Now here is the miracle: once you begin that life of promise, that is the way your life will continue. In other words, a child of God, one who is personally related to their Maker so that they know him personally, lives the rest of their lives by the promises of God -- by what God will do in their lives.

What are Christians? They are people who have given up their own lives -- the right to defend their lives or prosper them or advance them. They consider themselves dead. Anything they now do is up to the Father. That is the description we get in Hebrews 11:32, "And what more shall I say, for time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, whose faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated of whom the world was not worthy, wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth." These people were not too preoccupied whether they got the newest model car or not -- nor were they worried whether they would get a vacation this summer or not -- nor were they wrought up with whether they would finish their degree.

Children of God are people who have stopped worrying about the things that society is worried about. They have been freed from trying to make so many plans of what they are going to do next. They lived by God's promises. They did not expect God to allow them to live -- they expected to be crucified -- yet they suddenly found themselves alive. That is what it is like. You should be willing to die -- and you DO die -- you die to everything that is of this world -- to your possessions, to other people's opinions, to your future, to your relationships -- to everything. You are dead and your future is with God. Then Jesus is able to come into you and live in you. Then you can truly say you have died and it is no longer you who live but Christ who lives in you -- and you are living this life by faith in the Son of God.

A child of God is a person who has experienced that. They are surprised that they are still physically alive, but the world is no longer theirs to use as they please -- it's God's to use as he pleases. So they live their lives by the promises of God -- by what God tells them he is going to do with them. It is not that they are passive. They are active in response to God's direction. It is not that they don't take the initiative, but they only take the initiative as God's Spirit directs them. They do not live their lives like ordinary people. That is what the Father says in James 4:13-15, "Come now, you who say, 'today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town, and spend a year there and trade and get gain'; whereas you do not know about tomorrow, for you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that.'" People who belong to the Creator don't live that way.

They don't make plans for tomorrow. They only do what the Father tells them to do. So they live by his promises, not preoccupied by what they gain from his promises. We know that he has a plan for our lives and he will fulfil it.

Now, God's children are not caught up with what God promises but with the fact that he has made these promises and that he will fulfil them. You can see this in the example of Abraham and Isaac. God promised Abraham descendants as the "sand of the seashore", and they saw that was what he was miraculously bringing about when he created Isaac in the womb of a woman who was 90 years of age. They saw that the promise was being fulfilled and then, an incredible thing happened -- which we find in Genesis 22:1, "After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.'"

This was unthinkable because they believed that this was the son that God was going to use to fulfil his promise. Yet they were not preoccupied with what God had promised, but instead, they were caught up with his faithfulness to fulfil it -- and they trusted him to do it in his own way. "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; and he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and he rose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the ass; I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.' And Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place afar off. Then Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father, Abraham, 'My father!' and he said, 'Here am I, my son.' He said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.' So they went both of them together."

That is the way God's children operate. They have such faith that, even though the appearance of outward circumstances seems utterly contradictory to the possibility of the promise being fulfilled, they continue to move as God has guided them because they are utterly convinced that he will fulfil his promise. He will find some way to bring it about. Notice Isaac said, "Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Notice that he did not protest when Abraham replied that God would provide. That is the way the children of God operate because the Spirit of God dwells in them. That is the same Spirit that ruled above the jeers of the Roman soldiers, the insults of the crowds, and that Spirit was able to look up and see the Father waiting for him, and was able to cry, "Father, into thy hand I commit my spirit." That is the same Spirit that moves in God's children. They know that even if God had to raise Isaac from the dead, God will fulfil his promise to Abraham and Isaac.

God's children live independent of circumstances but by God's promises. Indeed, if they get into trouble it is because they take their eyes off the faithfulness of God and put their eyes on the circumstances. There is an example of this in Matthew 14:28, "And Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you bid me come to you on the water.' And Jesus said to him, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus." God's children walk on the water -- they walk on the promises of God. Yet, in verse 30, "But when he saw the wind he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him." God's children don't listen to the winds of circumstances. They don't listen to the sound of the waves. They don't feel the water under their feet. They look at God's faithfulness and they keep going that way -- and their life is governed by what God wants to do.

That is the heart of the verse we are studying today, Romans 9:10, "And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac." How did Isaac get Rebekah? Well, he went to the bars and watched for the best looking girl? Or he might have gone to a party and looked out for the best looking girl? No -- it was not that way! The children of God do not depend on their partners for their significance or their happiness. They are free at last to go only by God's promises. They depend on God completely to fulfil his promise in regards to marriage. He promised that he would pick the person for you -- therefore, he will lead you to that person. So you don't need to worry. You don't need to look at circumstances -- even if you are 35 and still have not found that person -- God will keep his promise to you as he kept it to Isaac.

That is how Isaac got Rebekah. Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac -- and you remember, he came to the well which is recorded in Genesis 24:42, "I came today to the spring and said, 'O Lord, the God of my master Abraham, if now thou wilt prosper the way which I go, behold, I am standing by the spring of water, let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, 'Pray give me a little water from yhour jar to drink,' and who will say to me, "Drink, and I will draw for your camels also," let her be the woman whom the Lord has anointed for my master's son.' Before I had done speaking in my heart, behold, Rebekah came out with her water jar on her shoulder; and she went down to the spring and drew. I said to her, 'Pray, let me drink.' She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder and said, 'Drink, and I will draw for your camels also.' Then I asked her, 'Whose daughter are you?' She said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bore to him.' So, I put the ring on her nose, and the bracelets on her arms. Then I bowed my head and worshiped the Lord, and blessed the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to take the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son. Now, if you deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; if not, tell me; that I may turn to the right hand or to the left.' Then Laban and Bethuel answered, 'The thing comes from the Lord; we cannot speak to you bad or good. Behold, Rebekah is before you, take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the Lord has spoken.'"

That is the way the children of God operate -- they go by God's promises. God promises that he will go and prepare the way before each one of us in this room. He will deal with us in regard to our marriages, in regard to our jobs, our futures, in regard to all the things which we have died to but which society looks to for its security, significance and happiness. God will be faithful to us. God will keep his promises. We are the people who live by God's promises, not by hope, not by our own wishes, or our own attempts to do what we can -- but we ask the Father what HE wants to do with our lives -- and we rest in complete assurance that he will bring those things about. He WILL.

I would encourage you all tonight to take hold of the promises of God. For example, take hold of his promises for healing if that is something you need. Just believe him for it. That goes for all the problems some of us might be facing in our jobs, in our families, in our marriages and in our romantic relationships. God expects us to live by his promises. He has promised that he will see you through these things and he expects you to live up to his promises -- not the circumstances. I pray that you will begin to do that -- and start at that miraculous birth by giving up trying to do the thing by yourself and just trust HIM to do it.

Let us pray:

Dear Father, we see that you intend us to live by your power and not our own. Lord, we produce such a poor imitation of what you have in mind for us when we try to do things by our own power. Lord, we would accept that we cannot. We cannot be free from anger, jealousy or envy ourselves. Lord, we see

that there is nothing to be done except for us to die with Jesus -- and you bring to life in us your Spirit that automatically lives as you want -- so that we may begin this exciting, supernatural life of living by the promises of the Father -- and seeing these fulfilled. We ask this, our Father, so that you will be pleased with us and so that we will fulfil the purpose for which you have put us here. The grace of our Lord Jesus, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us now and for evermore. Amen.