

The Endurance of Faith

Genesis 17

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

We're studying the way the Father teaches us how to walk in faith through the Old Testament and we're at Genesis 17 if you'd like to look at it. I don't think we'll get the whole chapter done, loved ones, even though I try to cover a chapter each time -- we'll probably get half way through.

Genesis 17:1-2. "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.'" And will multiply you exceedingly -- Abraham could have said, "You've said that before," because he did; God did say that before. He said it three times before to Abraham, actually, and the first time was 24 years before when Abram was 75. It's in Genesis 12:2. Abram was just starting out you remember, just leaving his home, and in verse 2 God said, "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves." So God said, "I'll make you a great nation," Then in verse 4, "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old." So that was back when he was 75 that God said, "I'm going to make you a great nation."

Then he repeated that in Genesis 13:16. "I will make your descendents as the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your descendents also can be counted." In other words God said "I'll not just make you a great nation, I'll make you as many as the dust of the earth." He used that simile. And then years later in Genesis 15:15 "when Abram was eighty-six" God said the same to him, a different simile, but the same thing; "And he brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars,'" not the dust, but the stars, 'if you're able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendents be.'"

So God gave him that promise three times before, and now he's 99 -- twenty-four years after the first time God said it, and God says it again. Why did God take so long to bring it about? Well two or three reasons. One is that you and I are so independent of God and so dependent on each other, and so dependent on ourselves, that we have great difficulty distinguishing between God's voice, our own voice, others' voices, and Satan's voice. So, often, God has to take a long time to convince us that what he is saying to us is really him speaking. You find in your own life that the things that keep on coming up in your heart and your mind as the years pass by are God's; those are God's words to you. As you get better at knowing God's voice, you'll be able to move like that. [Indicating moving smoothly and easily.]

On the whole, God won't punish you for wanting to be sure. Now if God thinks you're not just trying to be sure, but you're really trying to back off, then God will, in some way, rebuke you for that. But if you're simply, honestly anxious, "Lord, I want to know that this is your will for me" and if you're walking in fellowship with him, and you're studying his word, you're praying each day, and you're gathering together with other brothers and sisters whose words you respect and whom you discuss things with, then God has a way of gradually bearing in upon you, year after year, the desires that he has for you. So one reason is that God has to help us distinguish our own ideas

from his ideas, and normally his ideas are the ones that persist over the years.

Now, it's pretty serious if you have something in your heart that God has been speaking to you about over the years; then you do have to act on that. If you don't, you'll lose your life -- you'll lose your life with God, you'll lose direction in your life. So that's pretty important. If God has been saying something to you over a number of years, and you know beyond all doubt now that it is God because it's kept on keeping on, then you have to act on that. Otherwise you'll lose sight of God, and you'll lose the sense of his voice. Another reason God has to take a long time with many of us is that we do the same thing as Abraham; we act precipitously. That is, we act to bring about God's will by our own power and our own ability, and God has to initiate a remedial course for us in that situation.

You remember the incident with Abraham: God had promised him, "You'll have a son, it'll be your own son, just trust me. Even though your wife is just ten years younger than you, you're 75, she's 65; even though you're 86, she's 76; even though you're 99, she's 89; yet you're going to have a son by your wife." And you remember Abraham began to feel, "Well, maybe I should help God bring this about." So you remember what happened with Hagar; Abram decided to take Sarah's advice in Genesis 16. "Now, Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian made whose name was Hagar; and Sarai said to Abram, 'Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go into my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai." And he got off God's course.

Now God doesn't, in that situation, want to hammer us -- we need to see that. God doesn't say, "You did wrong; I have to punish you for that." But God knows that that was due to a weakening of your faith and he knows that he has to go around the back of you and strengthen your faith. So sometimes you prolong the period of time for God to make a promise real in you, because he has to go around and educate you again and edify your faith. That's why, loved ones, at times we lengthen the time that God would otherwise need to fulfill a promise to us because we act precipitately. We try to bring it about by our own power instead of being patient and waiting upon God, so the Father has to go around and undue, virtually, something that we did. I think you've heard some of us mention at times that if you go a few steps back in faith, that's a hill that you have to climb again; you better not be doing that, because it's a hill you have to climb again; God has to bring you back to that place of strength.

Now another reason is that God's main purpose in us here is not the things he's going to achieve through you. That's right. Even us brothers, we tend to be occupied by achieving something. We say, "Use me Lord, use me." Actually God is not primarily concerned about using us, and he isn't primarily concerned with what he's going to achieve through us. He is actually primarily concerned with building in us an unquestioning faith in himself. That's why he will often take years and years and years, and ask us to walk in absolute faith that he will fulfill his promise. Now what moves against that in our "instant coffee" society is that we are used to getting things now or yesterday and that's why there is so much superficial Christianity in our society and so little strong, George Mueller type of Christianity that changes society; because so few of us are willing to wait. We won't wait -- we won't wait.

In fact, it's interesting, we discourage each other. Do you know that? I just thought of it the other day. The question comes, "Well, how many of the ten thousand have you got abroad?" "Abram, have you looked at Sarah lately? I would just keep my eyes away from her if I were you." It is interesting, isn't it? We don't mean any harm by it - we don't. But isn't it interesting -- we kind

of undermine each other; we kind of needle each other. "How is Sarah coming?" Or "How are the ten thousand coming?" Of course, Abraham could reply, "It doesn't look like she'll ever have a baby. No -- not for a minute -- and thank God it doesn't because then I'll know it's the Father that does it." And that's the answer for the ten thousand -- "No, we've got about ten or twelve; looks as if it will never come about, but it's going to be God that does it." The Father is interested not in the results, not in the events, not in the achievements; he's interested in building hearts that have unquestioning faith in himself that will bring glory to him as we begin to undertake the massive task that he has for us in the new world that he is making.

So those are some of the reasons, loved ones, why God does require us to move in solid faith. There are some verses that might encourage you. I still have an ark river boat -- I just want you to know that I have not forgotten it! An ark river boat will one day ply the Mississippi river on Sunday afternoons in the summertime, and will be filled with students from the university. And if you have some dreams like that or some beliefs like that that you are having faith for, or you have ten thousand abroad that you're having faith for, I want to encourage your heart. I want also to make sure that none of us stand in the position of these scoffers; that's what they're called in the end times, you know. 2 Peter 3:3, "First of all you must understand this, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own passions and saying, 'Where is the promise of his coming?' For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation." And then Peter says, "They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God, heavens existed long ago, and an earth formed out of water and by means of water." Then in verse 8 he says, "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." And that's what Abraham believed.

That's why God gave him that command, if you look back to Genesis 17:1. "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.'" That was it; "Walk before me and be blameless. Be blameless before me. I can't guarantee you'll be blameless before men, you'll probably never be blameless before them -- they have higher standards than me -- but I ask you to walk before me and be blameless. That is, be blameless in your trust of me; I have already done this. I have already done all this. Your wife Sarai is already more fertile than any other woman has ever been. My miracle is already complete; you walk before me and be blameless."

Don't be afraid, loved ones, of the word blameless. Don't be afraid of the idea of walking perfect in the eyes of the Lord -- don't be afraid of that. You'll never be perfect in the eyes of all men; they have very high standards for you -- very low standards for themselves -- but very high standards for you, so you'll never satisfy them. But God expects us to walk before him and be blameless. And it might be good for you to see that in Hebrews 11. It's very popular today to take Satan's side in this and say, "Ah, you can't be blameless, you can't walk blamelessly in trust of the Father. There are always moments when you're going to crumble a little." But really, it runs right through the Bible. Hebrews 11:5, "By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was attested as having pleased God." So there was one man, even before Abraham, who was attested as having pleased God. So God is used to the idea and he's not put off by any of us who hope that we will be blameless before him. He expects us to be blameless in our trust in him and in our faith in him, and unwavering in it.

It's same in Genesis 6:9 where there's another man, even before Abraham, who was in the same situation. "These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God." So be ready to be blameless before God. Be ready to be blameless in your trust and your faith with him. No; it's not par for the course that you have to crumble a little when the storm clouds gather -- no. It is normal for God's children to believe their God.

Now that's what God refers to in Genesis 17:1, "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.'" That was the covenant of faith. That was the covenant that God had made about 13 years before when Abraham was 86. That was that covenant of faith and you find it in Genesis 15:5-6. "And he brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the Lord; and he [God] reckoned it to him as righteousness."

You remember what we said about that; that so many of us think, "Oh that means real righteousness is absolute obedience to all of the Ten Commandments. Now God saw that Abraham couldn't do that, so he said, 'Okay, you fouled up on the Ten Commandments. Okay, I will reckon this faith as righteousness -- it's not nearly as good, but I'll reckon it as righteousness.'" And that's not what "reckon" means at all. Reckon in that instance means God "regarded" it as righteousness. In other words, what God is looking for is trust. He is saying, "I have already made you the father of many nations. I have already done that; now I want you to believe that." It's good to see that that's what faith is; faith is not hope. Faith is confidence that God has already done it.

Now you will see that in Genesis 17 and reading from verse 3 on you will come to it. "Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 'Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram' Av in Hebrew is father, and Am is exalted. So no longer will you just be exalted father, but your name shall be Avra-ham. A-ham is the people, father of the people or father of the multitude. No longer shall you just be exalted father; you will be father of a multitude, "but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

Now the scoffers would say, "Your poor old wife has never had a child and here's God saying 'I have made you the father of many nations.' Now that's wrong -- he's got his tenses wrong; he really means 'I'm going to make you.'" But Abraham knew that God was telling the truth; this had already been done. God had already taken Sarah and put her into Jesus Christ and in the lamb slain before the foundation of the world, God had destroyed all the things in Sarah's body that had prevented her having children, and as he raised the lamb of God who was slain before the foundation of the world, and raised him up in fullness of life, he raised Sarah up with a perfect body that was able to bear a child when she was 99. And Abraham knew that. If you asked me if Abraham knew Jesus' name, it is hard to say. But Abraham knew that that had already happened, and that's why God was pleased with Abraham; because Abraham believed that what God had said had been done -- had been done.

Now, loved ones, faith is faith in what has been done; faith is not hope. And you get that emphasized again if you look at Romans 4:16-18. God is good because he comments even on that event years later, through Paul. He comments on that event to make sure we understand it. Romans 4:16-18, "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all its descendants --not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham, for he is the father of us all, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many

nations' -- in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." That's what Abraham believed. He said, "Lord, I believe you can even give life to the dead, and I believe you can call into existence things that do not exist. "In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, 'So shall your descendants be.'"

So Abraham actually hoped against hope. Faith goes beyond hope. Hope is a confidence that God will do a thing; faith is an absolute confidence that he has done the thing -- that it has already been done, and in some amazing way, Abraham knew that. You find that again if you look at Galatians 3:8-9. "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.'" So God preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham. That's why, you remember, Jesus said in that amazing verse in John 8:56. "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad. The Jews then said to him, 'You are not yet fifty years old and have you seen Abraham?' Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.'"

As I've mentioned so often, dear old Einstein knew that that was true scientifically; that time was one great eternal moment, and so Jesus was speaking truth when he said, "I say to you before Abraham was," even though it was a nightmare to an English teacher, "before Abraham was, I am." Abraham knew that the lamb had been slain before the foundation of the world. Do you doubt that -- oh that's the gospel; that's Revelation 13:8, and that's why all of us can look forward with such confidence to this next week. Revelation 13:8, "And all who dwell on earth will worship it, every one whose name has not been written" and you remember that the root Greek actually runs, "everyone whose name has not been written in the book of the life of the lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world" because the adverbial phrase "before the foundation of the world" actually modifies the word, "slain", not the word "written". So it actually runs "whose name has not been written in the book of life of the lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world." "Was slain before the foundation of the world" God foresaw that Sarah would be barren when she was 99, and God graciously, because he knew what he had intended to do through Abraham and Sarah, put Sarah into his son, destroyed that old womb that wouldn't bear a child, and renewed it; just the same way he did with your finances this coming week.

You think God hasn't foreseen what you're going to face? You think he has to wait for it to happen? Until then he can't see you're in a mess? Do you think God is in heaven responding madly to "Oh, Todd Anderson is in trouble?" No. It's not so. The great Father above us sees everything, has seen everything in one great eternal moment, and has made provision for it because he loves us. And do you doubt that? Well, just look at Galatians 6:14; it runs right through the whole Bible, and its why, of course, such a big thing was made of Jesus' death. It wasn't just that our sins were forgiven; it was something far greater than that. Galatians 6:14, "But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." The world is the cosmos, the whole world system. There's a whole complicated combination of your payables and receivables that are in the hands of the world. Your payables are the things that you owe to other people; your receivables are the things you are hoping you get in. And that's in the hands of the world and the hands of the prince of this world. And in Jesus, God disarmed the principalities and powers and he made a triumph over them in him [Jesus] and he sorted out all of those payables and receivables so that it will work right; your finances will work right. That's all up there in heaven on a shelf and that can be brought down from eternity into time, not through H.G. Wells' time machine, but through your faith. That's it; it will be unto you according to your faith.

That's what happened with Abraham; when God said to him, "You're going to have children as the sand upon the seashore, as the dust of the earth, as the stars in the sky. I have made you the father of many nations." Abraham didn't say, "No, you haven't -- look at my wife! Look at her old body. No, she can't do it." Abraham said, "I know Jesus -- I know your son. I know that miracle that has been wrought in eternity. I know you have already set all these things right. I know what you say, you have already done. Thank you, Father." And that's what faith is -- faith is not hope. Faith is not wishful thinking. Faith is not a fearful tentative way of going forward. Faith is absolute confidence that God has already done this. You know, in a way, if you sit there and think, "Well, do you think I could think of something beautiful that God hasn't done?" I doubt it; I doubt if you could. God's timing is different from yours, but I doubt you could think of anything too beautiful that he hasn't done in Jesus for you.

In other words, if you are walking and fellowshiping with the Father, and you're walking in obedience to him day by day, and you wanting all his best in your life, the most likely thing is that the most wonderful things you can think of, God has already thought of them and has already done them in his son Jesus. And it is really true that it will be unto you according to your faith. You may have to be patient. You may have to hold steady, but that's the beauty of it, you see; you don't step back from the position of faith because it has taken several years for it to come about -- do you see that? The only time you step back from the position of faith is when God says to you, "You're believing the wrong thing. I want you to believe this." That's it. But there's never a place for stepping back from faith because you hear a voice saying, "Well, maybe God doesn't want that for him." Or after a week of solid believing, you think, "Boy, I have been going a week, that's pretty good, and I don't see any hope of it coming about, so maybe it's not true." No -- the mills of God grind slowly, but grind exceedingly fine. "I go in my own speed, and a thousand years are but as a day in my courts. You'll just have to be patient and go at my speed. What I do, I do solidly, so you'll just have to wait for me."

But, loved ones, there's never a place for stepping back from position of faith through doubt, or because you have been waiting for a few months and seen no action. Abraham waited for 24 years before there was even a visible sign and that's really all he got in this chapter, just a visible sign. Just to mention one other thing, if you would look at it in Genesis 17:6-8, "I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. "And I will give to you, and your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

The land, of course, was the promised land; the promise land is the place of rest. It's the second rest of the people of God. It's what God promised the Israelites and promised all of us who are the spiritual Israel. We'd like to talk about that a little next day, but the important thing for us to see tonight is that God not only promised that he would multiply Abraham's children, but that he would give them a place to rest. The land stands for the place of glorification; the place where you will be conformed to the image of God; where you will dwell in God's immediate presence. It stands for sanctification. It stands not just for justification, where you will have your sins forgiven, but it stands for you being made like God. And you noticed that that was a promise to be received by faith also.

That's where you and I stand. If you, tonight, are troubled with all kinds of things inside your own

life that aren't like Jesus, if you are troubled by all kinds of sin that you cannot overcome, and you wonder how will I ever come into that promised land where I am conformed to God's image; you will come into it by the same way as you came into the forgiveness of your sins; you will come into it by faith. It is by faith. It is the fact that we know that our old self was crucified with Christ. That's it. It has already been done. It's already been done. And it's through our faith in that that God brings that perfect "you" out of eternity and recreates it here in time, in your life tonight. It is by faith.

So it's the same with that, as it is with other things; Satan looks at you and says, "Hmm, lost your temper again. Not doing too well, are you?" Then there is every place for you to say, "No; I'm never going to make it by my own efforts here. But I believe what God has said; that my old self has been crucified with Jesus. So Lord up I get out of this dust again. And Father, I believe that you destroyed that in yourself, and I believe that that has been done away with and that the old has passed away and the new has come. And, Lord, here I go again, new and whole and well in you." That's the way -- victory is by faith. The victory is not by responding to Satan's taunts, or to other's taunts or other's criticism. The victory is by faith. No, by the look of Sarah, she will never bring forth a child. And by the look of my present efforts, I'm never going to be Christ-like. "Father, I believe I have been crucified with you. I believe that, Lord. I apologize and confess it to you as down right sin, but Lord, I believe that's past and done with, and, Lord, I'm moving again, the old has passed away and the new has come."

That's the way, loved ones; the victory is by faith, because God has not sent you and me here to this earth to try to do what we could. He hasn't; he knows our weakness; he remembers that we're dust. He knows we're pretty helpless on our own. He has sent us to this earth with a victory already won in his son Jesus, and he wants you simply to believe it. Have faith in it and live in the confidence that that has happened, and as you do that, you will find a miraculous thing; that it has become real in you.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we thank you for Abraham walking 24 years with the promise ringing in his ears, with all kinds of people trying to undermine his faith. We thank you, Father, for his walk; continually believing you, and then when he slipped and he engaged in intercourse with Hagar, Father, we thank you that even then, you did not throw the man out but you went to work and you began to build up and strengthen that faith again.

Lord we thank you that you are the same with us; you do not deal with us according to our sins, you do not reward us according to our iniquities. As far as the heavens are high above the earth, as far as the east is from the west, so far are removed our transgressions from us. And Lord until we die, you will extend that same forbearance to us; ever coming to us again and reinforcing our faith and building us up. And, oh Father, we thank you for that -- that this is a veil of soul making; this is a place of education; this is a place of nourishing faith.

So, Father, we want to go out on that limb. Lord, we believe that we too were crucified with the lamb that was slain from before the foundation of the world. Lord Jesus, we believe that all the unpleasant and ugly things in us were destroyed in you. Lord Jesus, we believe that. And we are now going to go forth tonight, yet again, in confidence that the old has passed away and the new has come. Lord, we thank you that we're new creations tonight, whole and well. Lord, we take the same position in regard to our pains and our illnesses. Lord, we believe that you did bare our sicknesses

and carried our pains. Lord, we thank you that we are well people tonight, well enough to obey whatever you want us to do, our Father. So, Lord, we take that stand.

And then, Lord, in regard to the things that we will face this coming week; Father, we are not going to go forward in fear. We believe that you have foreseen what this week holds for us and we don't believe you are sweating it out. We believe you are at peace and so ought we to be. You're at peace because you have already provided a way for us. You have already worked all things according to the council of your will; already all things have worked together for our good, so Lord thank you for that, and that we have nothing to fear this coming week. We want to thank you that we can walk into each day's events confident that you have already put them right in Jesus because you have crucified the world to us and to us to the world. You have disarmed the principalities and powers and made a triumph over them. Thank you, Father, for that.

We thank you for this evening, for this life of faith and peace that you have called us to. We thank you that it shows in our faces; it shows in the lift of our hearts. It shows in the joy and exhilaration of our feelings. And, Lord, we thank you that that's faith that pleases God, the Father.

Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and evermore. Amen.