

"Crossed Fingers and Praying Hands"

Genesis 15

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For all but the first 36 hours of his life, 14 month old Paris had lived in our home. We couldn't imagine it possible to love a little boy more than we loved him. In every way, except one, it felt like he belonged to us – that we are his family. The one exception is that he was not legally ours – his mother, in prison, still wished to retain legal custody. Her plan was to be released from prison in the summer, get a place of her own and then take Paris. Though she was fascinated with the idea of having a son, she showed no interest in him personally and even less understanding of what it would take to care for a child. She didn't know him – she didn't know anything about him – what he liked to eat and didn't like, when and how he went to sleep, what amused him and comforted him.

We know the life his mother has lived, of the other child she abandoned and the lifestyle into which she would take him; she was a drug user, a prostitute and she was HIV positive. When I rubbed Paris' head at night, as I put him to bed, I couldn't help but wonder, "Would she care enough to do this?" or "Would she even be there to do this?" There's hardly a day goes by that we don't cry out to God, "What is going to happen to this little boy?"

During those 14 months there had been times when we thought maybe his mother would be willing to relinquish her parental rights and allow him to be adopted by a younger family. But no sooner would we see some light of hope than she would change her mind. We would see what looked to us like solutions, and then the problem would deepen.

I knew the Bible included Paris when it says that God loves the world. I knew "all things work together for good to those who love God". I knew God is sovereign, merciful and loving. I knew God provides special protection for widows and orphans – the powerless and helpless. Then why did I wonder whether God would take care of Paris? I saw the pictures on the news of the Kosovar children and I couldn't help but see Paris' face. God loved those children too and

yet look at what was happening. And it was happening not only in Kosovo but right here in Denver – not every child is cared for the way they should be. What about Paris, would God take care of him? Is that the way God would take care of him?

I'm supposed to trust God. I'm the preacher – surely I ought to be an example of unwavering trust. Instead I doubted – I struggled with how God would act, even whether God would act. I had more questions than answers. I knew how intense the struggle with doubt was and I only wondered how deep it would get that day when Paris was gone.

Have you ever doubted God? Have you ever questioned his actions or lack thereof? Are you now in a situation where you wonder, no, not just wonder, you doubt God's actions? You are in good company! No, I don't mean with me, I mean with Abraham. Imagine that! Abraham the father of Judaism and Christianity, the friend of God, doubted.

Please read Genesis 15: (ESV)

“After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” 2 But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3 And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” 4 And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” 5 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 offspring be.” 6 And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

7 And he said to him, “I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” 8 But he said, “O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” 9 He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” 10 And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. 11 And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. 13 Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. 14 But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. 15 As for you,

you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. 16 And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, 19 the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, 20 the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, 21 the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”

Did you hear Abram’s doubts? Two times he questions God. The first time is recorded for us in verses 1-5. In verse 1 God came to Abram in a vision and said, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” Earlier, in the context of what happened in chapter 14, we saw that God here is declaring himself to be Abram’s protector and the goal of Abram’s life. God didn’t want Abram to be seduced by self-sufficiency or by materialism. But no sooner does God say, “Abram, I am your shield and your very great reward” then Abram expresses his doubt. Look at verses 2-3: “O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless, and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

How’s that for chutzpah? In the very breath that he calls God “Sovereign Lord” he challenges God’s ability or desire. God says “I am your shield and reward” and Abram says, in essence, “God you aren’t coming through for me in the most important area of my life. You say you are my reward but what can you give me that matters if I have no child? Furthermore, God, you are responsible – you have given me no children. Years ago you told me you would give me children as numerous as the dust of the ground – but nothing has happened except that I’m getting older. “I guess I’ll have to give my estate to Eliezer, a servant I acquired in Damascus. God, it looks to me as if you won’t come through.”

I think only a woman, who has longed for years for children but has been unable to conceive, can begin to imagine the pain in Abram’s complaint against God. But I think Abram’s concern would be even deeper than that. I don’t emotionally empathize with it but I

intellectually understand that no children meant no security in his old age, no one to bury and care for the grave, no one to carry on the family name. All the fruit of a life-time of hard work would given to another man's son. What's Abram's mood toward God, doubt even anger?

Gary Habermas in his book Dealing with Doubt suggests three misconceptions about doubt:

1. We are tempted to believe that among Christians, doubt is uncommon. That is not true; we see doubt time and time again in the Scriptures – God's people questioning God. The Psalmist, David, probably expresses it more than anyone else. Peter doubted and Thomas doubted.
2. Another misconception about doubt is that true Christians don't doubt. We think that if we were better Christians we wouldn't doubt. That also is not true. I do think that the more experience we have with God, the less we will doubt but as long as we draw breath on this earth we will struggle with understanding the will and ways of God.
3. A last misconception about doubt is that doubt is always bad. I think that misconception stems from an incorrect assumption about doubt. We too easily think of doubt as unbelief and so we pit faith against doubt. But doubt is not unbelief, doubt is uncertainty. In fact, if we didn't believe we wouldn't doubt. **So doubt is not the opposite of faith.** Martin Copenhaver, in his book Living Faith While Holding Doubts, wrote, “We sometimes speak of doubt and belief as opposites, but perhaps it is more accurate to think of doubt as the shadow cast by belief.” (p32) No, doubt is not always bad, in fact sometimes, as Charles Hummer wrote, “a stronger faith can emerge through a siege of doubt; both holiness and faith are forged in the fires of temptation.” (Doubters Welcome p 16)

So here is Abram challenging, questioning, doubting God. And God responds. How God responds to doubt is very important to me.

But before we look at God's response, I want you to see **the second time Abram has the chutzpah to express his doubt.** In verse 7 God said to Abram “I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the

Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." What was Abram's response? "O Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" "Lord, I hear you, but I heard you before when I got ready to leave Ur and then Haran. I heard you when I stayed in this land after Lot left, choosing the better land by the Jordan. God, I heard you, but nothing has happened. How can I know it will? I don't hear anger in Abram's question this time, but I certainly do hear frustration, questioning, and a sincere doubt. And here, as earlier, God responds to Abram's doubt.

But again, before we look at that I want you to see the difference between doubt and unbelief. Unbelief is an unwillingness to hear from God. Doubt is a sincere questioning of God. Unbelief expresses pride – I know the answer and it's not you God! Doubt expresses humility – I don't know the answer but I'm seeking it. Unbelief is a conclusion, a state of mind. Doubt is a transition. In fact, doubt tests our faith and strengthens it. Thomas Guthrie wrote, "*Are not many damned just because they never doubt? They go on, satisfied with themselves; not doubting but that they are on the right course, when every step they takes leads them further and further away... If we would not make shipwreck of our faith... we will try our religion – put it to the test – see whether it is true religion.*" (In Parker's The Gift of Doubt p 64) On a lighter note, Fredrich Buechner calls doubts the "ants in the pants of faith. They keep it alive and moving." (Wishful Thinking p20) Often, like children, it isn't until we doubt that we learn the truth. Doubting can test our faith.

But doubting also strengthens our faith. Rufus Jones wrote, "*A twice-born faith, a rebuilt faith, is superior to an inherited faith that has never stood the strain of a great testing storm. If you have not clung to a broken piece of your old ship in the dark night of the soul, your faith may not have the sustaining power to carry you through to the end of the journey.*" (In Parker) What is a little frightening to me, knowing the rest of the story of Abraham right on through to chapter 22 is that God puts him to a far greater test in the future. It is frightening because I see myself in Abram's place – and as severe as Abram's doubts were at this point, I know that his situation will get more difficult – and I wonder if my faith will hold or if my doubts will turn to unbelief. But what is encouraging is to see that God was building Abram's faith. One step at a time, one experience after another, God

was at work in Abram. And even Abram's doubts were used by God to accomplish God's purpose – a man who trusts God.

Two times Abram challenges or questions God. Two times he expresses his doubts. Now how does God respond? Notice first what God doesn't do – he doesn't slap Abram down! He doesn't rise up in his sovereignty and say "Well you ungrateful piece of dust!" No, God comes to Abram and he does two things:

1. He reaffirms the promise, he reiterates the truth, he reminds Abram again of what will happen.
2. And, secondly, He makes a covenant with Abram – dramatically, unconditionally binding himself to the things he promised.

He makes the promise again and he stakes his reputation on it. As certainly as God is God, so these things will come to pass. In the first instance when Abram complains about having no children, God takes Abram outside and says, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them...So shall your offspring be."

What a great object lesson. There are over 8000 stars visible in the middle-eastern sky. Without cameras to assist, I suppose that Abram, like many of us as kids, had given up trying to count the stars. He was content knowing that there were many, many of them – too many to count. God seems never to grow tired of reassuring Abram's faith. He had earlier said Abram's children would be more numerous than the dust of the earth. This time he takes him outside at night and says, "There, look! I am again telling you and now demonstrating to you with stars that I hope will remind you every time you see them – I will do what I have promised."

When, many years later, the nation of Israel was in her darkest hour – in slavery in Babylon she doubted God's goodness. In Isaiah 49:14 she says, "The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me!" But God came to them again and said in Isaiah 49:15-16, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast, and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you. See I have engraved you on the palms of my hands..."

Throughout Scripture and throughout our lives by the good things we enjoy – as Jeremiah said, "The Lord's compassions never fail. They

are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." Every day, and every good thing we experience, are testimonies to God's grace and the certainty of his promises yet unfulfilled. The very stars of the sky testify to the trustworthiness of God.

But God not only reassured his promises he very dramatically staked his reputation on fulfilling his promises. The scene that is described in verses 9 and following is fascinating. After the second time Abram expresses his doubts about the future, God said get some animals and bring them to me. We are not told how Abram knew what to do with them but he prepared the animals a certain way. We are tempted to think of the animals, as a sacrifice in worship but that is not what happens. We now know from other ancient sources that it was common in that day for agreements to be made in this way. The animals would be cut in two except for the smaller birds and then the pieces would be laid in two rows opposite each other with a place to walk between the two rows. When people would make an agreement they would walk together between the killed animals dramatizing their commitment to keep the agreement. Some historians say that the symbolism is that each person is saying, "May it be done to me, as it has been to these animals, if I don't keep the agreement I am here making."

I say it is a fascinating incident because of what happens **compared to what we expected.** We expected Abram and God to walk down the aisle between the animals together to symbolize their commitment to each other. But what happens? Abram prepared everything and then he fell into a deep sleep. The Bible says a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.

Abram was next going to hear good news and bad news. **The bad news first:** The thick and dreadful darkness that falls over Abram reminds me of the scene in Charles Dickens' book Scrooge, when Ebenezer Scrooge is overcome with fear and foreboding as the angel comes to show him the future. Likewise Abram is told what will happen to his descendants. They will become slaves in a foreign country for 400 years. **But the good news** is that they will come out of that slavery and inherit the land God has promised them. And in the very midst of that very intense experience God does the unexpected. God didn't ask Abram to join him in making a covenant,

an agreement with each other. **God acted all on his own** as Abram observed. God walked down the aisle between those dead animals and said, I make **an unconditional covenant** with you Abram. This covenant is not dependent on you – it is only dependent on Me. As surely as I live, so certainly, will your descendants inherit this land. Trust me!

Several hard but important things suggest themselves to me as I think about this passage.

1. God told Abram that he, Abram, would not personally see his descendants inherit the land but it still would, in God's perfect timing, eventually come to pass. God has promised he loves us and will do good for us. He has promised that he loves that little boy named Paris who lived in my home and would do good for him. I may not see it come to pass, but it will nonetheless be true – God has promised.
2. There is a second thing – the promise would not be fulfilled until after Abram's descendants had gone through a very trying, even tragic 400 years. I don't like this; I want good to be experienced right now. There is nothing, to my knowledge, suggested here or elsewhere in Scripture that says Abram's descendants spent time in Egyptian slavery as a punishment for their sin. We don't know why, in God's plan and timing, the Israelites had to go through what they did. I look at that and I say there is no guarantee that the road we will travel will be smooth. Nothing says there will be no pain. There are still more miles to be traveled before the end. But God guarantees his promises will be fulfilled regardless if it takes 400 years.
3. The third thing suggested to me, I also don't like; I want other assurances that I can touch or see. In both situations Abram is still given only God's word for what will happen. Abram surely wanted some tangible proof. Abram surely wanted God to say, "Okay, Abram, I know you want children so if you will go to Sarah right now she will tell you that she now knows she is pregnant." Abram surely wanted God to say, "Okay, Abram, I know you want this land that I have promised, so if you will go outside right now you will see the kings of all the land coming to you to deed over the

entire region to you, making you the owner and ruler.” It doesn’t happen. Abram is once again asked to trust – to believe God because God said it. No immediate resolution, no evidence that you could take to anyone else to prove it, just God’s word – sealed with a unilateral, unconditional covenant. We are finally left with nothing but God himself.

I said I don’t like that, because I’m too much like Abram. But when I stop to think about it, what proof could I get of God’s promises that would be more assuring than God’s word? When it comes down to it, God’s word is the only sure, certain, fully trustworthy thing on which to build any hope. Your future, my future, and Paris’ future are not dependent on anything else being true except God. If anything less than God’s word was the guarantee of our future, we would soon realize how insufficient and incapable that guarantee was.

In the early 1800s Edward Mote wrote a hymn that is familiar to many of us. It is called “The Solid Rock”. The words are these:

“My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus’ name.

“His oath, His covenant, His blood support me in the whelming flood; When all around my soul gives way, He then is all my hope and stay.

“On Christ the solid rock, I stand – all other ground is sinking sand.

Abram wanted to see the future, to have a guarantee of the future, but God pushed Abram back to the only true hope and guarantee that Abram had – God himself. When the day was done, when Abram’s complaints and doubts were expressed – he had only one thing left – but it was more than enough because anything else would be “sinking sand” – he had God’s word!

4. There’s one last thing I want you to see. Look at verse 6:
“Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as

righteousness.” There is much to be said for this verse and the concept it presents about justification by grace through faith and the New Testament writers Paul and James say much about it. But that is for another message. What I want you to see is the incredible juxtaposition of doubt and faith presented in this passage. Right between two expressions of doubt and maybe even anger at God, God credits Abram’s faith as righteousness. Abram is granted a right standing with a holy God. Imperfect as Abram’s faith was and doubting as he may have been, God knew that Abram was trusting God.

I don’t know if I’m there. I know how my heart vacillates. I know how I question the wisdom of God and even the goodness of God in the midst of this situation with Paris. I know my doubts loom large in my mind – so large at times that I wonder about my faith. But then I stand back from time to time and I realize I only argue with God because I believe he’s there. I only complain about his timing and actions because I believe he is in control. I only challenge his mercy and grace because I believe he is THE God of mercy and grace. I have no one else to whom to go – He alone is God.

What faith-challenge are you facing today?

“Do not be afraid...I am your shield, your very great reward.”