

Advent I: My Hope Is Built

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "so shall your offspring be" – Romans 4:16-24 (18 shown)

Looking Ahead

The holidays are upon us. For many of us, this means looking forward to cooking all day, Black Friday, Cyber Monday, holiday parties and the like. It is interesting how we "look forward" – there is a lot of preparation for each of these events. We decide long before how we will engage the event when it comes, and have definite hopes and expectations about what the outcomes will be. Just think about Thanksgiving: how long were we mentally engaged in what the meal would be, who we would be with, how much we would eat... we could see, smell and taste the meal weeks before it ever happened. Those preparing the meal also had hopes and expectations – smiles on people's faces, appreciation of all the hard work... rarely do the events in our lives only have one-sided hopes.

Advent is also a time of looking forward - a time of hope. Looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. Just as with the holidays, we prepare for His coming in many ways, and have hopes of what His coming will bring for us. What we place our hopes in is important, because, as we will see in the life of Abraham, it definitely influences the overall outcome.

Can You Handle It?

- *The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you." – Genesis 12:1-3*

Abraham was a strapping young man of 75 when God showed up in his life. At 75 and childless, Abraham had not given up the hope of having a son, even though every day was a reminder that this probably would never happen. Yet it was in this place that God met Abraham. He showed up to a man full of hopes that even at his age he was not willing to give up. What Abraham discovered was he was not the only one who had longings to be fulfilled - God did as well. Furthermore, God was inviting Abraham into the challenge of joining God in fulfilling His hopes. God wanted to use Abraham's hope to fuel an even greater mission. As Abraham heard God's invitation, he couldn't help but associate His promises with his own longing. In this, God gave Abraham a reason to hope.

- *he took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired at Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan and they arrived there – Genesis 12:5*

God called, Abraham answered, and he was on his way to fulfill what God promised: *I will make you into a great nation, and all will be blessed through you.* Abraham took God's word and set out with members of his family and entourage, not knowing exactly how God would fulfill Abraham's hopes, but was willing to accept any means to that end.

Hopes Deferred

- *The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him – Genesis 12:7*

Abraham was following God and pressing toward God's promises, but he also had a dilemma. It was one thing for God to talk about blessing others through him, but now he was openly touching on the very thing that Abraham wanted for so long – children. At 75, Abraham was now being called on to accept that God was going to fulfill this lifelong hope – something that each day and year said would never happen.

- *Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life – Proverbs 13:12*

Abraham was not the only person who faced this dilemma. Zechariah was visited by the angel Gabriel as an old man and told that he would have a son. As much as he wanted to he was unable to believe this promise would be fulfilled. In this area, his heart was sick – unable to connect with God through faith in His promise, so God had to take drastic measures to ensure that he did not shortcut God's ability to bring His promise to fruition.

- *... and now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time. – Luke 1:19*

Sometimes we end up shortcutting the process God puts us through because of the heart sickness that comes from deferred hope. We have to hold on to the longing, knowing that when God does come through, it will be a tree of life for us.

Continuing to hope, even in the most difficult or challenging of circumstances allows God to fulfill His word which will be life giving (a tree of life) at the appointed time.

Verse	Text
Genesis 12:2	I will make you into a great nation
Genesis 12:7	To your offspring I will give this land
Genesis 13:15	All the land you see I will give to you and your offspring forever
Genesis 15:1	Do not fear Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward

God's method of dealing with the heart sickness is to confirm His faithfulness to His promise. He continues to bring us back to focus so we can continue to hope.

Hope's Focus

Abraham had quietly followed God through His promise but with this last promise had to speak up. Each of the previous promises was specific to Abraham's desire for a son. This desire, this longing became the filter through which he interpreted God's word. Even in later conversations with Sarah, they knew God had promised offspring, but instead of letting God move in His way, used the filter of their longing to determine their next steps to making it happen.

Often we determine that God will use our ability to produce the fulfillment of His promise *to us*. The stronger tie we have to that hope, the harder it will be to separate out our effort in fulfilling it.

- *Do not fear, Abram. **I am your shield, your very great reward.** – Genesis 15:1*

God began speaking differently to Abraham, which caused him to speak up. God was not mentioning offspring anymore, at least at this time. As long as God continued to talk about the *one hope* that Abraham had, it was ok. When God turned the focus away, Abraham needed to refocus God on Abraham's need and desire.

- *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 house will be my heir.** – Genesis 15:2-3*

Abraham wanted God to fulfill his personal longing, not realizing that God also had a longing. Abraham wanted one son and a family name that would continue, but God wanted many sons – nations to be touched, affected and effectively *borne* through the faithfulness of one. God was bringing Abraham into His own longing, and through that introducing him to Hope itself.

Hope Versus Hope

- *Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness. – Genesis 15:4-6*

Abram wanted a son... an heir. What God had was much bigger. Abraham had hope for what was major for him, but God showed Abraham that what He wanted was so much greater. With God's word, Abraham was brought back into alignment with God's longing, His hope, and the promise He was prepared to fulfill.

- *Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, **he faced the fact** that his body was as good as dead since he was about 100 years old and that Sarah's womb was also dead. – Romans 4:18-19*

It would have been great had Abraham believed, then turned around to find his wife carrying the fulfillment of God's promise. That was not to be. God continued to walk Abraham to the **end of his own ability** to fulfill his longing. Abraham had to wait another 15 years. Not only that, he had to get to the point of saying that **God's promise is His to fulfill – I have no strength in myself to bring it to pass.**

Abraham saw his life's fulfillment in giving birth to a son. God saw Abraham's life very different, and brought Abraham to God's vision of him. In this, Abraham had to change his hope from "**having** a son" to **God Himself**.

- *... **I am**... your very great reward.*

Abraham's hopes had to change. He could not hope in his own ability. He couldn't even hope just in the fulfillment of his longing. Abraham had to shift from what he had hoped in and turn to hoping in God alone.

- *I said I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth while in the presence of the wicked. So I remained utterly silent, not even saying anything good. But my anguish increased. My heart grew hot within me. While I meditated, the fire burned. Then I spoke with my tongue: "Show me, Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Everyone is but a breath, even those who seem secure. Surely everyone goes around like a mere phantom; in vain they rush around, heaping up wealth without knowing whose it will finally be. **But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you?**" – Psalm 39:1-7*

David was able to see that all of our longings, good or bad, are at best temporal, yet consume so much of our focus and energy. Wealth, security, long life... all of those things without God mean nothing, and so focuses his hope on God alone. Abraham also went through a process where he no longer looked at himself or even his longing provided as his hope.

- *By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." **Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death – Hebrews 11:17-19***

Against hope (in himself) Abraham in hope (in God) believed. God used that to not only fulfill Abraham's longing, but to do so much more in and through him. God does the same with us as we are willing to come to the end of our own hope, and turn our hope to God himself.