



Whatever you believe about president Obama, you cannot argue with the fact that he inspired hope in our nation. His detractors would say that it was false hope and false promises and his supporters would say that the president needs more time to fulfill his promises, but either way, when the vote was cast in 2008, Obama was able to inspire hope. And what was his message? That we can change things, that we can turn this nation around. His message was no different than any other politician, really. When the voters cast their lot and placed their hope in Obama, was our country beyond repair? We have enormous problems in our nation, but it has never been beyond repair. It wouldn't take a miracle to move the country in a better direction.

But when Abram placed his hope in the Lord, he was facing insurmountable odds. He was promised a great land, a vast territory that his people could settle in and prosper. But by chapter fifteen, how much land did Abram possess? None! He was a stranger in a strange land. Hebrews tells us that Abraham, *by faith...made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country.* (Heb. 11:9) Eventually, he would own a burial plot, but by this point he had nothing.

Abram faced insurmountable odds in regard to building a nation. How was the nation building working out for Abram? How many descendants did he have? None. He had many servants but no children. Remember from chapter fourteen that Abram took 318 of his men to fight against four kings and rescue his nephew Lot. If he had 318 fighting men, he probably had more men servants who were either too old or too young to go out to battle. Therefore, we can make an educated guess and say that Abram had about 500 men servants and probably an equal number of female servants. Let's put it this way—if Abram moved into Viroqua, he would immediately become the largest employer and richest man in town. But despite his wealth, he owned no land, he had no children and he has already faced famine, foe and failure in this foreign country.

Humanly speaking, Abram had no hope. Land could eventually be purchased in this hostile country, but children were out of the question. He was too old, and even though his wife was still beautiful, Sarai was also too old. The apostle Paul summed it up this way in Romans 4:18, *Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed.* That's the way life feels sometimes—that our backs are up against a wall, that all hope is against us. *Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed.* Abram did not place his hope in a government leader. Abram did not place his hope in hope. His was not a leap of faith into the dark. Abram's hope had a definite target. Let's read his encounter with the Lord.

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram.

I am your shield,

your very great reward.”

²*But Abram said, “O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?”* ³*And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”*

⁴*Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.”* ⁵*He took him outside and said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”*

⁶*Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*

This story begins with a vision from the Lord. The Lord’s opening words could be turned into a hundred sermons. *“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”* How is that for a promise?! We have to be very careful when we attempt to claim promises found in Scripture. Often we fail to take hold of the promises that do belong to us and sometimes we try to claim promises that are not intended for us. For example, do you and I have any right to lay hold to the promise in verse five? *“Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”* Have we been promised a large multitude of descendants? Can we lay claim to the promise of becoming a great nation? No, we must not claim this for ourselves as it was never intended for us. However, the promise in verse one does belong to us—*“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”*

This is an eternal promise that we can claim every moment of the day. Do not be afraid, Rich. I am your shield and very great reward. Do not be afraid, Brian. I am your shield and very great reward. Do not be afraid, Sheila. I am your shield and very great reward. Notice that the Lord does not simply provide a shield—he *is* our shield. He does not just provide a great reward—he *is* our great reward. This is a clear statement of the all-sufficient nature of the Lord. He is all we need. He is the greatest reward and he has to give us himself because there is nothing greater that he could give than himself.

It also reminds us that fear and faith are incompatible. Why did the Lord tell Abram not to fear? Was it because Abram might have been startled by the presence of the Lord in a vision? This is what the angel Gabriel said when he appeared to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Though we have already seen some of Abram’s great faults and deceptions, he had been brave enough to fight against four allied kings to rescue his nephew Lot. Abram was wimpy at times but overall he was no wimp. So why the assurance to not be afraid? This phrase “do not be afraid” is used 69 times in Scripture and almost without exception it is spoken to calm the listener in regard to the near future. Many who heard this were about to face their own battles or times of persecution. Many were facing years of captivity and enslavement. Many were going before kings and rulers and needed assurance to be strong and courageous.

But Abram was not going into battle. Abram was not about to appear before Pharaoh again. Abram was not being led into captivity. But he was facing a test of faith. Abram was about to

hope against all hope. He was going to be asked to believe, not the improbable, not the unlikely, but the impossible. I would like Chris to come up front please. Chris, would you please stand right where I am standing? I don't mean next to me, but in the exact same spot. Do you see what Chris needed to do? He had to push me out of the way. You have just witnessed the law of physics called the Pauli Exclusion Principle which states that two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Just as Chris and I cannot occupy the same space at the same time, neither can faith and fear abide together. Faith and fear are incompatible. Abram was going to be asked to have faith in the impossible and this would not happen if fear stood in his way. It doesn't mean that fear completely disappears, but it means that faith pushed fear out of the way. You may have a situation you are facing right now where you feel choked by fear. You've asked God to remove the fear and help you to function but it doesn't seem to happen. I don't necessarily think that fear always disappears in the presence of faith, but if the two are mutually exclusive, that means that every step of faith that you take pushes the fear back a few steps. In this way, you can drive the fear back with every step of faith.

Notice how Abram responded to the Lord's words of comfort. ² *But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?"* ³ *And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."* Abram knew that the lord had promised to make him into a great nation but his only heir was a servant that he picked up along his journeys in Canaan. It would seem that his closest heir would have been his nephew Lot, but there is obviously an ancient law of inheritance that states the next closest heir would be a servant in his household. Notice how the Lord answered Abram's statement. ⁴ *Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir."*

Can you imagine the impossibility of believing this promise? It would be a bit like someone taking you to a forest of redwood trees, giant sequoias, giving you a small axe and they say to you, "Start chopping!" So you reply, how do you expect me to chop down this enormous tree with a small axe?" To which they respond, "Oh, no, you don't understand. I don't want you to chop down one tree. I want you to chop them all down!" This must have been a little how Abram felt when he was thinking about how this promise would come to pass.

I like how Abram responded: *You have given me no children.* This is not a complaint directed at the Lord. He is not demanding, "Why have you not given me any children, Lord?!" The statement is filled with faith because it recognizes that he is dependent upon the Lord for this promise to be fulfilled. In so many words, Abram said, "You have given me no children, and until you do so, I know that I will not become a great nation." I realize that Abram and Sarai were too old to bear children, so in one sense, Abram had to talk in this way. Only God could give children. But I don't think he is speaking only out of desperation here. I think he is professing a faith in God as the ultimate provider of children. Had Abram and Sarai been thirty years old I think he would have said the same thing.

And this is the right way to view such things, is it not? Sarai was barren until God opened her womb. In the same way, Isaac's wife Rebekah was barren and was Jacob's wife Rachel. In Genesis 20, Abimelech and his household were prevented from having children as a punishment for taking Sarah as his wife, Hannah, the mother of Samuel, was not able to conceive until God

opened her womb. Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, was finally able to conceive by the command and promise of the Lord. Instead of a complaint, Abram's statement was filled with faith—*You have given me no children.*

In the same vein, if we have been blessed with children our confession of thanksgiving should be "You have given me children." But we shouldn't stop just with children. You have given me a wife. You have given me a house, cars, a job, food on the table, my next breath. The vast majority of things that we have we take for granted. We think crazy thoughts like this: "I know how children are conceived and frankly, I don't remember seeing God there at the time. I work 40-50 hours per week, so how can you say that God gave me my food? I was the one who laid down my hard earned money at Village Market. We don't actually say these things out loud because they sound so awful when we hear them spoken, but we do think them. Worse still, we fail to thank God when he does provide and then we blame him when he doesn't give us what we want, or when he gives us things that we don't want. Thankfulness is not just something we do on special holidays or during a prayer before meal time. Thankfulness is a habit that is based on deep theology and Biblical truth. The theology of thankfulness declares that everything comes from the hand of the lord.

Moreover, we also declare that everything that God gives us is meant for our good. This is what Jesus clearly taught in Matthew 7. *Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!* (Matt. 7:9-11) If we believe that God gives us stones and snakes then we are doubting his goodness. No scratch that. If we believe that God gives us stones and snakes, then we are not just doubting God's goodness, we are certain that he doesn't always give good gifts. And once you get to that point, all hope is lost. If you can't look at your whole life, even the things that we tend to call "bad," and declare that everything you have received is meant for your good from a perfectly good God, then you have opened the door to believing in a God who can do evil. You don't even want to open that door a crack. You don't want to even see a sliver of light come through that door because if God is not perfectly good, then it follows that he possesses some evil within him. And if you allow for that possibility, then you are forced to ask, "How much evil is in God?" Where does such a query end? If God has even a hint of evil then he is evil and we are to be pitied above all men.

But some will say, "Rich. I would never say that God can do evil. That's just plain wrong!" You may never say it or even think such a thing, but if you cannot thank God for *all* things in your life, then you have just opened the door to an imperfect God. Do you see, our actions tell us a lot more about our beliefs than we might realize. In this case, my doubts about God reveal my miserable theology. Doubts that lead to truth are OK, but doubts that don't lead anywhere are dangerous and deadly.

We left Abram in verse three with the profession of faith—You have given me no children. Let's see how the Lord answered that statement. ⁴ *Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir."* I love this section. There is something very intimate about the Lord's words. First, the Lord addresses his concerns head on—*This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be*

your heir. In other words, “I will give you children, Abram, and I am not slow in keeping my promise.” Then the Lord led him outside like a shepherd gently leading his sheep to better pasture. From this we understand that the Lord first appeared to him while he was inside his tent and we also learn that the event took place at night because the sky is filled with stars.

⁵ *He took him outside and said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”*

The Lord is a master teacher using perfect illustrations to get his point across. Just as he pointed to the rainbow in the sky to verify his promise after the flood, so now he pointed to the sky to show Abram his future descendants. The rainbow can only be seen under certain conditions, but almost any night Abram would have been able to step outside and be reminded of God’s perfect promises. Furthermore, God made him an active participant in the illustration: *count the stars—if indeed you can count them.* Can the stars be counted? We now know that there are billions times billions of stars in the universe, so of course these cannot be counted. But we also know that with the naked eye at the most two thousand stars can be seen on a clear night. Could Abram have counted 2,000 stars. It would have been difficult, but possible. However, by the time he got done counting most of the stars, the earth would have turned on its axis and more stars would have been visible on the horizon. So how many descendants was Abram to expect? Two thousand? A billion times a billion? A later repetition of this promise in chapter 22 makes it more interesting. The Lord said, *I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.* (Gen 22:17) So how many grains of sand are on the seashore? To complicate matters more, look at this quote from Genesis thirteen. *I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.* So it’s not just grains of sand that need to be counted, but particles of dust!

Obviously the Lord is using hyperbole to make his point. Abram would have a finite number of descendants, not billions times billions. The point is that God would not only give him a child, he would make him into a nation. Therefore, God not only gives children but he multiplies children as well. All increase, all multiplication of harvest, multiplication of families and multiplication of wealth is from the Lord. Against all hope, Abram believed this amazing promise. Look at verse six. *Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.* What did Abram believe? He believed the promise that God would make him into a great nation. And how did God reward him? The Lord credited it to him as righteousness. This is pure salvation language. Righteousness is what we all need but it is also what we all lack. Righteousness is the essence of God’s character. God is righteous. Righteousness is his essence, but it is not our essence. Our nature is sin and to be accepted by God we must have his righteousness.

This is what theologians call imputation of Christ’s righteousness. We do not earn righteousness neither are we made righteous in the sense of being sinless, but the righteousness of Christ is credited to our account. This past week my tax returns were electronically credited to my bank account. This credit is a legal declaration that these funds now belong to me. When we place our faith in Christ, his righteousness is credited to our account. Some call this an alien righteousness because it is completely “alien” to us. It is foreign, other-worldly.

This alien righteousness is plastered all over the pages of the New Testament and one of the most important verses is 2 Corinthians 5:21. This verse can be broken down into five parts that I refer

to as “The Gospel Glove.” This is a one verse presentation of the gospel that you can remember by the fingers of your hands.

1. *God made him*—It was God’s plan to send Jesus to the cross, and Jesus went there willingly.
2. *who had no sin*—this declares the sinless, perfection of Christ, the spotless lamb and sacrifice for sin.
3. *to be sin for us*—Christ died on our behalf, literally in our place—“for us”
4. *so that in him*—After salvation, the Bible says that we are “in Christ.”
5. *we might become the righteousness of God*—we have this alien righteousness credited to our account.

This is a one verse gospel presentation, it explains what happened to Abraham and it is the essence of all worship.

Rich Maurer
February 14, 2010