

Romans 4:13-15

Promises, Promises

In the book *Stone Soup for the World: Life Changing Stories of Everyday People*, Marianne Larned writes about Eleanor Roosevelt. Let me share...

In her time, Eleanor Roosevelt became the most trusted woman in the world, and not because she was the president's wife, or because she was born into one of the country's leading families. Eleanor Roosevelt earned people's trust by always keeping her promises.

When she was a very young child, Eleanor's father promised her that when she was a little older, the two of them would live together again. She lived for that day. After her mother died, she was very lonely, living with her grandmother, who was very old, strict, and old-fashioned. When her father broke his promise, it broke her heart. At ten years old, she realized that she had to become strong in herself if she wanted to go on living, and she vowed that she would never break a promise. For the rest of her life, she could always be counted on to keep her word.

The soldiers in the hospitals in the Pacific islands that she visited during World War II believed her when she said she would telephone their families the moment she got home. Something in her manner made people know they could trust her.¹

Many of us would aspire to be like Eleanor Roosevelt. As I read her story, I was painfully aware of the many ways I fall short. How many times I have promised that something would be ready for a particular day and time and missed the deadline, or simply did not follow through with something as I had dared hope I could. Those are the daily things, however, there are promises that one makes that are much bigger, like the promise at a wedding to honour and cherish someone 'til death do they part. Our divorce rates show that to be a difficult promise to keep.

In this scripture we hear of the promise that God gave Abraham – that he and his children would possess the earth. This reference comes from Genesis 17. Now there are a couple of things that might perk up your ears. If you know anything about Abraham and his wife Sarah it is that they were well beyond child bearing years and had no children together. Abraham was 99 years old and Sarah 90. And to be fair, both Abraham and Sarah, in their own separate moments laughed that God might make such a promise. But this wasn't the first time that God had promised this to Abraham. We first hear of it back in chapter 12 of Genesis when Abraham was 75 years old. At this point

¹¹ [Marianne Larned She Kept Her Promises - Thrive Global](#) Accessed October 10, 2024.

thinking that God might need a little help with the making children part, Sarah had Abraham sleep with her Egyptian maid Hagar who did manage to get pregnant. But that wasn't the way of God. God had other plans. So, we get to this point where God makes the promise a second time some 24 years later saying "I am The Strong God, live entirely before me, live to the hilt! I'll make a covenant between us and I'll give you a huge family."

Now a covenant is a promise between God and people. It is not like a legally binding contract that says, if you do this, I will do this. A covenant was God saying I will do this. There was no earning the promise. The promise was made in response to Abraham's faithfulness to God. There was nothing that Abraham was required to do, it was a promise made because Abraham to this point had believed and trusted that God would do what God said God would do

When God promises something, we can trust that God will follow through. Still, though Abraham and Sarah had trusted God, this promise seemed preposterous and frankly, impossible. Their response was to laugh. Yet, God was serious. God promised and God delivered on that promise, as they soon learned when Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to their son Isaac. An aside, the name Isaac means laughter.

We need a bit of a history lesson in order for this passage from Romans to make any sense to us. Without the background story from Genesis, one does not grasp the point that the Apostle Paul is making in this letter to the Romans and for us now. Another piece of the history lesson is also that the Jewish people had long believed that the covenant relationship they had with God was for them and them alone. That what marked them as the people of God was that the men had been circumcised. Every male of Jewish descent had been circumcised since the time of Abraham. And with another great leader, Moses, they as a people had been given the law, what we call The Ten Commandments, and those two things in particular singled them out as God's people of special privilege before God.

What Paul was saying throughout this letter is that, yes, the direct descendants of Abraham are God's people through blood, but so are all others who come to God through Jesus and trust God as Abraham did. The reason for bringing Abraham up is that the covenant that God made with Abraham was made before Abraham was circumcised and long before God gave the Ten Commandments. And if that was so, then those things, circumcision and the law, though not taken away from them as God's people, did not define all of Abraham's descendants.

It is why Paul says that "Abraham is the father of us all. He is not our racial father...He is our faith father." (v16). Going back, Paul says, "This is why the fulfillment of God's promise depends entirely on trusting God and his way, and then simply embracing God and what God does. God's promise arrives as pure gift." And it is a gift for everyone whether they are circumcised and identify as Jewish or whether they are what Paul calls gentile believers, which is everyone who is not Jewish but believes in God through faith.

No one is singled out as better than they other, each have the opportunity to believe in God's promise to be made right with God and to have abundant life. I truly appreciate the way we hear this scripture through Eugene Peterson's plain English when it comes to the talking about the faith of Abraham, so let me read again to you verses 19-24 in particular.

¹⁹⁻²⁵ Abraham didn't focus on his own impotence and say, "It's hopeless. This hundred-year-old body could never father a child." Nor did he survey Sarah's decades of infertility and give up. He didn't tiptoe around God's promise asking cautiously skeptical questions. He plunged into the promise and came up strong, ready for God, sure that God would make good on what he had said. That's why it is said, "Abraham was declared fit before God by trusting God to set him right." But it's not just Abraham; it's also us! The same thing gets said about us when we embrace and believe the One who brought Jesus to life when the conditions were equally hopeless. The sacrificed Jesus made us fit for God, set us *right with God*.

God took Abraham and Sarah's bodies that should not have been able to bring life into the world and gave life to them through the child Isaac. God took the crucified and buried body of Christ and gave life through the resurrection. And now we are given life through our belief in God, through Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit to bring life. We are made right with God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. When things seem hopeless, we are given hope.

Let's spend just a little time with that word hope because sometimes we confuse hope with optimism or thinking that hope means that all things will get better. So how are we to understand it when we speak of hope as Christians. Professor Doug Bratt share that "The historian Christopher Lasch (*The True and Only Heaven*, W.W. Norton, 1991) once wrote, "Hope is not the naïve thought that tomorrow will be better. Hope has braced itself, and is thus prepared to cope if tomorrow isn't better. It may take some time. And hope doesn't depend on you and me getting our act together and fixing things, like optimism does."²

So our hope is based in God's promises, promises like...God will be with us, we are loved, we are forgiven. We are promised that the Holy Spirit will comfort, lead, guide, and teach us. We are promised that God will respond to our prayers, while remembering that how our prayers are answered are not up to us. This is not about what we would like God to promise us. The promises are what God has spoken into being. So grounding ourselves in God's promises, believing that God is capable of doing and following through, that God will do what God says God will do, that is where we place our hope.

When we embrace and believe the One who brought Jesus to life when the conditions were equally as hopeless as that of Abraham and Sarah trying to have a child, we can

² Doug Bratt. [Romans 4:13-25 - Center for Excellence in Preaching \(cepreaching.org\)](http://cepreaching.org)

trust that we are made fit for God, set right with God. We are children of God, loved, forgiven, and set free to live an abundant life even when there is struggle and challenge. We are part of Abraham's big family.

So as you go through your day making decisions, dealing with your life and the things before you...as we as a church plan and prepare and hope...as the world seemingly plunges into despair as we watch hurricanes, flooding, wars, politics and power bring so much uncertainty and in some places death, we continue to trust that the God who brings life out of what seems like death is still at work in the world today.

We have reason to trust that what we see is not the whole. God's got this because God has promised life. And so we continue each day to trust, to believe, to hope, and to *follow this one God in the name of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*