

**THE PROMISE OF GOD**

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16; Romans 4:13-25

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I love how this passage begins by stating how old Abram is. “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram...” (vs. 1a) Who would expect anything great to happen at the age of ninety-nine? And here is the Lord appearing and he says, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous” (vs. 1b-2). Here’s something, which should have been obvious but somehow we take lightly: our faith matters even in old age, even at the age of ninety-nine. God is telling a 99-year-old man, “Look, I am God Almighty, and I want you to show your faith and holiness in your life.”

Your faith in old age matters because your faith will make an impact for many generations in future. What Abraham was about to experience and how he acted in today’s passage have impacted the lives of his offspring and all Jews and Christians. What you experience and how you act in old age can have tremendous impact on the lives of your children and Christian communities.

His name was changed from Abram to Abraham. Abram means “father of height” while Abraham means “father of a multitude”. Sarai means “my princess” and Sarah means “mother of nations.” I believe this act of renaming has done a number of things in the hearts of Abraham and Sarah, all taken place under the radar. This act of renaming brought callings from God in their hearts. Then, their callings created for them new identities. The new identities produced a new vision for their future. Only a couple of letters in their names were changed, but a lot had changed. They were called to be before God as his instruments in old age. These callings gave them new definition of their status in God’s eyes. Abraham was no longer just a father of height; he’s now a father of a multitude. She’s no longer just my princess; she’s now a mother of nations. These new identities gave them an insight into their future, no longer just a happy senior couple, but a father and mother of many kings and rulers and nations. Do you feel we have this kind of calling, identity and vision from God? I believe God has installed a powerful and amazing mission and vision in the faith community at Oakridge Presbyterian Church. Here’s what we believe our mission (or calling) is: To develop and inspire passionate followers of Jesus Christ; To be intentional in evangelizing the Oakridge area, and the wider London community; To initiate and support mission activities locally, nationally, and internationally. Do you feel your calling, identity and vision are being stretched as you hear these words? Do you feel that God is calling us to be, not only the church for ourselves, but for Oakridge area, the wider London community, the nation of Canada and the world? Can one church truly be the church for all? Well, if God made one couple the father and mother of billions of people of faith, why not? If God did it in the lives of a 95-plus-year-old couple, why not you?

If you are like me, who can get excited about this amazing calling, you may also want to ask, “What’s in it for me?” What is exactly promised by God in this amazing calling? Well, let’s find out in his promises to Abraham. First, you will be exceedingly fruitful. He said to Abraham, “I will make you

exceedingly fruitful.” In other words, if you can truly and wholeheartedly embrace this amazing calling God has given to us, he can make your ministries exceedingly fruitful; many lives can be transformed through your ministries. Your ministries can impact and change the future of our city and nation and perhaps even the world. I was just at a lunch meeting last Tuesday with other significant Church leaders in London to celebrate the outcome of the 2017 fall city-wide Alpha campaign. There were 18 of us who shared great stories of many lives changed at their Alpha experiences and how many churches literally multiplied their impact of reaching so many lives with the Good News of Jesus Christ. We all agreed that London’s spiritual ground is shaking. Maybe you and I are living in the time, where we are not simply saying something nice on mission statements, but actually seeing these callings come alive and fulfilled in this generation, starting with anyone, who is willing to embrace the callings wholeheartedly.

Second, our children will make a God-honouring influence in the world. God said to Abraham, “I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.” Not only Abraham’s children form one great nation, there will be many kings and nations, rising from his offspring. I believe his plan is not just for Oakridge Presbyterian Church to be fruitful. But, he wants to raise the children of faith to make a God-honouring, Christian and positive influence in the world. The children raised at Oakridge Presbyterian Church can become great politicians, lawyers, doctors, entrepreneurs, CEOs, church pastors, missionaries, musicians and all kinds of people, who impact the world for God’s Kingdom. We can develop and inspire passionate followers of Jesus Christ, and from us they can go and become a champion of Jesus Christ in the parts of the world where God calls them to be. Both the father and mother of the baptized child (at 11:00 service) today have attended our church and I wish they will be the champions of Jesus Christ in their parenting of their two lovely children, so that the children will grow up to be the champion of Jesus Christ in their own lives. I wish and pray that our youth at OPC will be the champions of Jesus Christ in their future careers and at their schools right now. In fact, I am talking with some youth, who have taken the Thursday Pizza Lunch Alpha at our church, to offer youth Alpha in the next year right at their school in their classrooms. I have done some preliminary work, so the next successor can have a good shot of offering Youth Alpha at the neighbouring schools next year.

Lastly, God can repeat these blessings over and over again in the generations to come. Imagine if we experience all these amazing blessings in our time, but about 50 years from now, God stops his blessings on our future generations. But, God’s promise is everlasting. He said to Abraham, “I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” It’s amazing that God’s promise is not just for one generation, but eternally true for all generations. This is why Paul in Romans says “No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith ‘was reckoned to him as righteousness.’ Now the words, ‘it was reckoned to him,’ were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.” His promise is not only for Abraham, but for you and me as well, and he based his promise, not on the law, but on his grace, so that anyone, who put his

trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, can benefit from his promises. Just a little caution: the Hebrew word for everlasting, *'olam*, is not “unconditionally forever.” Otherwise, how do we explain Israel’s fall in the Old Testament, when God promised *'olam* kingdom to David? Many scholars interpret *'olam* as an open-ended perpetuity (c.f. Walton, J. H. 2001. Genesis, p.450). In other words, God will not provide anything that can disrupt the fulfillment of the promises; it will only be our betrayal and distrust that can limit the extent of how much his promise can influence our lives. At the same time, this also means even if we betray and distrust him at times, we can always turn back to God, who always welcomes us and gives us another chance.

So, how does it work? God’s promise works, not through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. Let’s think about the season of Lent we are in. We often give up things during this season, not because we are trying to earn favour from God, but this act of giving up is the physical sign of our anticipation of God’s work of salvation, and surely enough, it’s the sacrificial act of Jesus Christ on the Cross that brings us the fulfilment of God’s promise, including his salvation and new life. When Abraham was not capable of producing a child, he believed in God’s promise. He not only believed in his heart, he lived and acted according to his belief. He adapted a new name God gave him. He then began living a life of holiness (Remember, God told him to walk before him and be blameless), trusting that his faith matters and God’s promise would one day come true. And surely enough, all of God’s promises came fulfilled through his Son Jesus Christ. Today, will you join with me in believing in his promises and beginning the life of holiness in this season of Lent? Yes, your faith matters to God, and he has wonderful promises for you at the end of your faith journey. May God receive all glory and honour. Amen.