

Text: Genesis 15

Title: "Growing Strong in Faith"

Time: 6/8/08 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: The kids are home from school now beginning last Thursday, so I have seen more of them, and I have been reminded that they are growing. Brandon especially seems to be taking off on us here a bit. He is coming into that time of life when kids hit their growth spurt. You essentially experience your vertical growth-spurt when you are around 13 or 14, and your horizontal growth-spurt when you are about 40. At least that is the way it worked for me.

Since Genesis 12 we have been studying the life of Abram. In Romans 4 the apostle Paul sums up this life by calling it a life of growing strong in faith (Rom. 4:18-25, "Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness. Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.").

The life of Abraham was written down for our sakes, so that we might know what it means to grow strong in faith in the way that Abraham did.

Now if the life of Abraham can be summed up as growing strong in faith, his experiences recorded in Genesis 15 can be summed up as a growth-spurt. The growth of Abram's faith is accelerated to the point that we actually have the first mention of the word "believe" in the Bible (v. 6). I want us to see three principles about what it takes to grow strong in faith from Abram's experiences in this chapter.

I. Growing strong in faith requires listening to God's Word (vv. 1-6).

Illustration: It has always amazed me how much kids going through growth spurts can eat at a place like McDonalds. We had a wonderful time praying with our brothers and sisters from Trinity Baptist Church in Fitzwilliam this past week. On our way home we pass right by that McDonalds restaurant in Jaffrey, and my kids having not eaten in a while took little coaxing when I asked them if they wanted to stop at McDonalds on the way home. I heard about how they were starving and would love to stop.

The apostle Peter uses a similar picture when he describes the appetite we need for God's Word in order to grow, only he uses newborn babes and their milk rather than kids experiencing a growth-spurt and their Big Macs: "like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grown in respect to salvation." (1 Pet. 2:2).

Because Genesis 15 describes a faith growth-spurt in the life of Abram, it is not surprising that we see a lot listening to the Word of God in this chapter (vv. 1, 4, 5, 7, 9, 13, 18).

Application: There are a couple of ways in which God's Word strengthens the faith of believers according to Abram's example:

1. God's Word assures us that God cares for our needs personally (v. 1, Abram's wages would be as great as the grain collected by Joseph in Egypt, Gen 41:49).
2. God's Word assures us that God cares for our needs with omnipotence (vv. 2-5).

Often the trouble with us when our faith is weak is that we have fallen into the trap of facing life without the nourishment of God's Word.

Illustration: This is like trying to play golf in the middle of summer without drinking water. I had a golfing partner when we lived in Texas who actually did that—he liked the red Gatorade instead, and it just made him sick in that 100 degree heat. We need to long for the nourishment of God's Word if we are to be strong in the faith.

Application: Faith in God's Word results in God's imputed righteousness (v. 6). I want us to notice some important salvation doctrine from this first mention of the word *believe* in the Bible.

1. The faith of those who believe is a continuing faith. The Hebrew grammarian Gesenius says of the special form of the word *believe* here (a perfect with a *waw*) that it speaks of "a longer or constant continuance in a past state" (G.112.ss). The idea conveyed by v. 6 is not that Abram believed one time and then stopped believing later on, but that he lived in a state of believing God. Saving faith is not a faith that just appears for a little while and then vanishes

away – that is the seed on stony ground, not the seed on good soil that bears fruit (Matt. 13:3-9).

2. The righteousness of those who believe is an imputed righteousness. This means that it describes our record before God, not the character or nature of our lives before God. The same construction is used in 2 Sam. 19:19 (“And said unto the king, Let not my lord impute iniquity unto me, neither do thou remember that which thy servant did perversely the day that my lord the king went out of Jerusalem, that the king should take it to his heart.”).

What is at stake in regard to Shimei in this passage is not whether or not he is guilty, but whether or not David would treat him as though he were guilty. When God imputes righteousness to us, we are still sinners who are guilty of offending a holy God, but God does not treat us this way. He treats us as though we are righteous, and He remains righteous in doing so because Christ died in our place. Remember Melchizedek’s bread and wine in the previous chapter?

So growing strong in faith requires believing God’s Word, and it turns out that when we believe, our salvation experience of imputed righteousness becomes the bedrock of our faith in the truth of the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:14-15, “But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”). When our faith in the Scriptures is tested by some doctrine we do not understand or some circumstance of life, it is helpful to remember that the Scriptures gave us the truth that saved our soul and changed our life.

II. Growing strong in faith requires patience with God's plan (vv. 7-16).

Illustration: Robert W. Service was a Canadian poet who enjoyed writing about the rugged West of that nation, especially about Yukon gold miners. He wrote a poem called "Carry On!" about patience and perseverance. It says in part:

"It's easy to fight when everything's right,
And you're mad with the thrill and the glory;
It's easy to cheer when victory's near,
And wallon in fields that are gory.
It's a different song when everything's wrong,
When you're feeling infernally mortal;
When it's ten against one, and hope there is none,
Buck up, little soldier, and chortle:

"Carry on! Carry on!
There isn't much punch in your blow.
You're glaring and staring and hitting out blind;
You're muddy and bloody, but never you mind.
Carry on! Carry on!
You haven't the ghost of a show.
It's looking like death, but while you've a breath,
Carry on, my son! Carry on!

Application: God's plan is seldom what we would draw up for ourselves. He planned on making Abram a great nation, but He planned on doing it after four centuries had passed and by way of the bondage of Egypt.

His plan for us may involve time frames that are longer than we want them to be, and circumstances that are more difficult than we would want them to be. We may need to learn what it is to fight on even while we are losing, while

things are not successful, while things are not what we wish they were. We need patience with God's plan in order to see our faith grow especially in these times, and I believe that our passage gives us three characteristics of this kind of patience.

A. Patience with God's plan involves step-by-step obedience (vv. 7-11). I am sure that Abram had a hard time seeing the connection between God's promise to give him the land of Canaan and God's command to split and arrange on the ground some animals. Yet Abram obeyed. There may be something that we really desire that God would do for us, and we cannot see how getting to prayer meeting each Tuesday night is going to help accomplish that. Yet we need patience with God's plan, and this patience requires step-by-step obedience.

B. Patience with God's plan involves a willingness to face tribulation (vv. 12-16). Bondage in Egypt was not a tragic consequence of Israel's foolishness; it was a part of God's plan for them. They had to understand what it was like to face tribulation before God could use them as the kingdom of priests that He wanted them to be.

Illustration: Robert Service's poem has another verse:

"And so in the strife of the battle of life
It's easy to fight when you're winning;
It's easy to slave, and starve and be brave,
When the dawn of success is beginning.
But the man who can meet despair and defeat
With a cheer, there's the man of God's choosing;
The man who can fight to Heaven's own height
Is the man who can fight when he's losing."

C. Patience with God's plan involves a settled understanding that God is good (v. 16b, "the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete"). Joshua's attack on Canaan was not a war of man's aggression; it was a war of God's just judgment, justice that finally fell after four centuries of neglected and rejected forbearance, grace, and mercy.

III. Growing strong in faith requires remembering God's covenant (vv. 17-21).

Application: When the Hebrews wanted to say *make a covenant*, they actually said *cut a covenant*. *Making a covenant* was called *cutting a covenant* because of the ceremony we see in this passage. When two parties made a covenant, they would split animals and pass through the animals. The idea evidently was that should either party break the covenant, then he would be deserving of the fate of these animals.

Here God uses that ceremony, but only He passes through the animals. He is the only one being bound by the terms of this agreement that He is making. God's covenant here is unconditional because God's covenant love is unilateral. Our faith becomes strong when we remember that it is not we who have chosen God, but God who has chosen us. He has bound himself to the promise of our salvation, and He will not fail us even though we may fail Him. 2 Tim. 3:13 assures us, "If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself."

Conclusion: How strong has your faith been this morning? The passage is clear that faith is what justifies us. If you have not trusted Christ as your Savior, if you think your goodness is enough to justify you before God, then you have not even started to grow – you lack spiritual life. You

need to trust Christ today and have the righteousness of God imputed to you through His death and resurrection in spite of your sin.

If you know the Lord's imputed righteousness this morning as one who has trusted Christ for salvation, has your faith been growing stronger or weaker recently? If weaker, the solution is listening to God's Word, patience with God's plan, and remembering God's unilateral unchangeable covenant love for you. Satan wants to sift us as wheat and make us weak in the faith. God wants us to trust and obey and even hit a faith growth-spurt for His glory. Unlike physical growth spurts, we can have a say in what the growth of our faith will be.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching