

February 8, 2009

## "This isn't one of my sermons; I expect you to listen!"

Genesis 22

You have faith in what you believe! If I believe in Jesus as my Saviour and Lord, then you could expect that I would live differently than if I didn't. My faith should shape the choices I make, the ethics by which I live, my perspective on life, death, and eternity, etc., etc.

One of my favourite TV characters is Father Mulcahy in *M\*A\*S\*H* (our title is one of his more famous quotes). What appeals to me about Father Mulcahy is that, as a Christian character, he is different from the others in the army hospital. Some of the differences are obvious in his behaviour - his morality amid the amoral chaos of the camp, his efforts to help orphans, his Christian counsel. But other differences in Father Mulcahy are more subtle, reflecting a fundamental difference of character than the others - he models patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control (not qualities in most of the other characters). Interestingly, those are all "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23). Yes, he is a chaplain who says the right Christian things. But what is at least as significant is how he lives his faith.

Dallas Willard points out that: *"We always live up to our beliefs. You don't necessarily live up to what you profess to believe. Very often what you really believe comes in conflict with what you profess to believe - guess who wins? What you really believe wins. As a culture we often put emphasis on professing to believe things we don't believe. In many churches we have professed to believe what we don't believe so long we don't actually know what belief is. And we think we actually believe things we don't believe. And we actually think we believe things we don't believe and our life doesn't work around these things; we're amazed that we can believe all these things and not act as if we believe them. The problem is we are living up to our beliefs. But not up to our professions. Our professions are relatively powerless against what we really believe. For example, we may believe that God will take care of us. If we do believe that, we will act as if that were true. If we only profess to believe it, we won't act as if it were true. We will probably act as if we have to take care of ourselves. And if we act on that principle, then issues like obedience to Christ, walking in the fullness of Christ, knowing the power of the Spirit - real stuff like that - is apt not to be there."* How am I doing at living up to what I profess to believe?

### *Life as a Roller Coaster*

God had promised Sarah and Abraham a son. It looked impossible; both of them were *"well advanced in years."* But God knew what He was doing; they had a beautiful baby boy. Just when Abraham things life has achieved some level of "normal" he finds himself in a crisis again. God is asking Abraham to do something that would destroy the very miracle they had just experienced! It raises the interesting question of what is "normal"?

Last week I was in Calgary for a denominational meeting. If there were not traffic, it should take me 2 hours and 40 minutes (according to Google Maps). It took me just over 3 hours. I hit a white-out near Nobleford, construction in south Calgary, and a traffic jam near Chinook Centre. 2:40 was "ideal" but it is not "normal." In fact, it is abnormal. If I expected to reach CBWC offices in 2:40 I would have been very frustrated: I would be mistaking the "ideal" with "normal." We do that with our expectations of life. Somehow we have come to the conclusion that a "normal" life is one that glides along with health, happiness, and prosperity. We may even consider those things "rights" we should expect from life, the government, or God. When something comes along and disrupts this "normal" life we wonder why God is doing this to us.

What is "normal" in our fallen world is not a smooth, gliding monorail that soars above all the chaos and confusion (that may be ideal but is not normal). "Normal" life is a roller coaster with ups and downs (remember Ecclesiastes 3). And unlike a monorail that is designed to take us somewhere, a roller coaster is designed with the ride in mind, not the destination.

Some people see the roller coaster as terrifying; for others it's exhilarating. Fearful people are stressed because they feel out of control and worry the cars will fly off the track. Those who love roller coasters welcome the sense of being "safely" out of control, because they have faith in the designer and builder; they enjoy the ride. Whether or not we got on the roller coaster is the difference between professing to believe and living up to our beliefs.

Genesis 22 is a dramatic test of Abraham's faith - does He trust God or not? Does Abraham trust God's promise that he and Sarah will be the parents of a multitude of people? Of course God knows that He is not going to allow Abraham to actually go through with this sacrifice! But Abraham doesn't know that yet! Will Abraham trust God - not just in the good times but also in the challenges of life? What about me? What difficulties, stresses, or challenges am I facing? Has He ever let me down? How far am I willing to trust God? Will I trust Him?

### *Defining Faith*

"Faith" is hard to define. Perhaps the best definition we have is Hebrews 11:1:

- *"Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see"* (NIV)
- *"Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"* (KJV)
- *"Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see"* (NLT)
- *"The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see"* (The Message)

In Hebrews 11, we have case studies of faithful people. We see Abraham: *"By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise ... By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice ... Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death."* (Vs 11, 17-19)

Verses 13-16 give us a glimpse into the inner life of these faithful people. What "makes them tick"? *"All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own ... they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."*

They knew that life here and now is not all there is not all there is! In fact, real life only begins once we are with our Lord. This is a very difficult perspective to cultivate and live, isn't it? Especially in relatively affluent (even in spite of the stock market), comfortable, and safe places like Canada! Tertullian, an early Christian writer during the brutal days of Roman persecution once commented: *"If you are looking for heaven on earth you will never find it: you are a bit of a fool in the bargain as well if you think this heaven!"*

Think of it this way: imagine you are living in a desperately poor country. Life is hard - you are hungry, sick, living in squalid conditions. But you know that one day - you don't know when - you will come to Canada and enjoy a new home, health care, and ample food. What would your perspective be? You would know that you are really a *"stranger and alien"* in that place of suffering - you are only there for a season. It is not all there is. There is something better! The hope of getting to Canada and a new beginning keeps you going.

In the same way - only on a scale we cannot imagine - we are invited to remember that life on earth is not all there is; something much, much better is ahead of us. In the meantime, we can be confident on the roller coaster of life knowing our lives are safe in God's hands. We can hold on to our earthly security and comfort a little less tightly - this is not all there is.

### ***Faith Decisions***

Faith decisions are important milestones in our lives! Several times in Abraham's life he is put in a place where he has to make a tough faith decision. At some point - back before we enter his story - he made a decision to believe in God. We enter his life when God calls him to *"leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you"* (Genesis 12:1): in this case he trusted God and went. He faced famine; he didn't trust God and got himself in trouble (12:10-13:4). He gave Lot the choice of what land to take - even though Abraham ended up with rocky hill-land, he trusted God and God blessed him (13). His small troop of fighting men faced King Kedorlaomer's army; He trusted God and they won (14). He was promised a son; he couldn't wait so he had a son with Sarah's servant Hager - he failed (16). Now, Abraham is called to sacrifice Isaac ...

Have you made the decision that you believe in Jesus as your Saviour, Lord, and God? Not just to profess to believe, but to really believe? If not, what is keeping you from it? Today you can make that decision. Simply pray, affirming your faith to Jesus, confessing your sinfulness, and praying for God's transforming presence. Personalize John 3:16 if you like: *"God, I believe that*

*you loved the world so much that you gave your only Son, Jesus, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. Lord, I believe. Please forgive my sins. Help me to love you with all of my heart, mind, soul, and strength. And help me to live, faithfully, for you. Amen."* Tell someone about your decision! Celebrate!

Different traditions mark this time of personal decision in a variety of ways. In Baptist polity, we express our faith commitments through believer's baptism. When a person makes a decision to affirm Jesus as Saviour and to seek to follow Him as Lord, we encourage them to express that publicly through baptism. As they are baptized, people who feel comfortable share a testimony - a short summary of their faith journey. However, even if a person does not feel comfortable telling their story, simply answering "Yes" to the question, "*Do you believe in Jesus as your Saviour and Lord?*" at their baptism is a wonderful witness and affirmation of their faith. In other churches, confirmation - if it is an affirmation of personal faith - is a similar thing.

If you have already made that kind of personal faith decision, remember that time. Draw strength from that commitment you made. Remind yourself of your affirmation. Are you living up to the profession you affirmed? Does your belief change the way you live your life? The reality is that, like Abraham, believing in God is not a one-time decision. It is a decision we make over and over again, as we face new and challenging circumstances. In fact, we only really grow in our faith when we do face obstacles that force us to choose: will I trust God or not? Will I try to solve things all on my own, or will I live my beliefs and trust Jesus?

### *The Roller Coaster of Faith*

*"When we climb that big first hill of the roller coaster, we do not expect to just get to the top and have a pleasant ride up there. We know there are going to be nerve-wracking turns and breath-taking dives. If we expect them, we are somewhat prepared for them. God does not promise a smooth ride; he only promises to hold us in his embrace. That is our only guarantee, and it is the basis of our expectations. The euphoria and exhilaration do not eliminate the pit in the stomach; they are the response from relinquishing control to another. In that sense, we can say the life of faith is often not characterized by a calm sense of well-being; it is a thrill ride" (John Walton).*

Those nerve-wracking turns and breath-taking dives are going to come whether we have faith or not. If we choose not to believe or simply profess to believe we're on our own - it will be scary. If we truly believe, we can enjoy the ride!

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