

Genesis 18:1-15, September 26, 2010

Let us pray....

¹ The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. ² Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

³ He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. ⁵ Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way — now that you have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

⁶ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread."

⁷ Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. ⁸ He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

⁹ "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him.

"There, in the tent," he said.

¹⁰ Then the LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. ¹¹ Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

¹³ Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."

¹⁵ Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh."

But he said, "Yes, you did laugh." *This is the Word of the Lord.*

Whether you are watching daytime TV or scanning the ads that often come up in the margins on Internet pages, you'll often see promotions having to do with products and procedures that are offered to improve the looks of a customer. These can vary from non-surgical facelifts to liposuction to creams that claim to melt away cellulite. No matter which of these rejuvenating products you encounter, they all make the same basic claims. These claims may be based in part on some sketchy medical results, but often they promise the same transformation that snake oil salesmen used to hawk to the desperate and gullible.

“Just think about it! You, even you, can look younger in just 15 minutes. Simply apply our revolutionary formula, and lift 10 years from your face anytime you wish! No expensive, painful surgery! 100% money back guarantee! For more information, click here, or call our 800 number. Operators are standing by, seven days a week, 24 hours a day, to serve you! This miracle is at your fingertips, so don't miss this golden opportunity!”

Without question, it's appealing to think that something so incredible can be attained so easily and simply, for just \$19.95. But it's also clear that people who buy products and services like this are willing to have enough faith in them to spend their hard-earned money. What's sad is that sometimes even we are willing to have faith in things and other people, but hold back when the Lord asks us to trust Him. He challenges us to have faith, but sometimes we resist because the investment He wants is much more than \$19.95. In fact, He asks us to give Him everything we have, and everything we are. And even though we know He is supremely loving and merciful, sometimes we struggle to give Him our minds, hearts, souls, and strength, and obey Him by loving others as ourselves.

Because of this, we might say that there are times when we Christians don't need face lifts, but “faith lifts.” The passage we read from Genesis portrays the gist of a struggle we all encounter, one way or another. In this case, there are 2 elderly people trying to reconcile their unfulfilled longings, hopes, and dreams to have a child, with the promise of God to remedy their situation in a marvelous, miraculous way. They both face

the gap between what they desire and belief about the Lord, and what their minds tell them is humanly possible, tinged with a good dose of skepticism and doubt. Sarah laughed and said to herself: "An old woman like me? Get pregnant? With this old guy of a husband?" – You could imagine her just dismissing the thought by saying, "Yeah, right! Tell me another one! And I have some land in Florida to sell you!"

I don't know if any of you are hoping and longing for a child, but together we are facing daunting and doubt-producing financial challenges -- those of replacing the front steps and sidewalks, and fulfilling your covenant with me through next August. Like Sarah and Abraham, you also may have a gap in your personal life between what you desire and believe about the Lord, and what your mind tells you is humanly possible, perhaps tinged with a skepticism and doubt. You may think in your head that God is theoretically able to provide for all of this congregation's needs, but your gut says that everything is doom and gloom.

So whether we're talking about finances, or any other seemingly overwhelming struggle we face, the pivotal question is, "How does the Lord want us to respond to the challenges before us?" I'll start by mentioning the unhealthy ways that people can deal with struggles. Sometimes they just ignore problems hoping they'll somehow go away. They might resign themselves to thinking that it's just never going to be better, and there's nothing they can do about it. Sometimes people pass the problems off to someone else, which is just another way of ignoring the issues. Or they learn to live with the problems, instead of trying to find constructive answers that will help them solve the problems in a positive way. And other times, people blame someone else, and expect the other party to bring resolution.

Any and all of these options may occur at some point, in some way, when people face a struggle. But notice one thing: all of these options lack prayer, and any effort to involve the Lord in the answer. The way we as disciples of Jesus face challenges should be fundamentally different than those who don't trust the Lord, because He is the foundation of our lives. Our first instinct, and only real hope, is to turn to Him for strength, for hope, and for the faith to really trust Him with all of our heart, and not lean on our own understanding.

So I want to ask you this morning: how do you respond to the question the angel of the Lord put to Abraham? Is anything too hard for God Almighty? If your response, deep down, is a “NO, ...but...,” then you are in need of a FAITH lift.

When we encounter struggles, we may ask ourselves, “how will God handle it? It all really seems too much to believe!” This is what Abraham and Sarah both asked, but this question is really not our concern. It’s the Lord’s business. Our job is simply to bring our need before Him in the confidence that He cares for us, that He knew our need BEFORE we were even aware of it ourselves, and that He has a solution already worked out.

But that doesn’t mean that we put our feet up and relax. The Lord expects us to make ourselves available to Him in whatever way He chooses, to be the channels through whom He works to bring about His purposes. The Lord often does miracles out of the blue, but many more times He delights in involving us in the process of bringing about amazing things. And in the Body of Christ, each and every member should be contributing to God’s work, not just by tithing 10%, but by offering time and talents as a gift of love to please Him.

The first verse of Hebrews 11 in the old King James version states, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” The NIV puts it this way: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see.” On the contrary, how often have you heard people say, “I’ve gotta see it to believe it.” Our culture tells us that the only things we can be absolutely certain of are the things we can see with our eyes, feel with our hands, and weigh or measure with our scientific equipment.

Well, the Biblical faith that the Lord desires to grow in us is the exact opposite. True faith says, “You’ve gotta believe it to see it.” It says, “Believing is seeing.” This isn’t a hard concept for us to grasp because it is the kind of thing each one of us does many times every day. We exercise ordinary faith so often without even thinking about it that it’s a natural part of our lives. And every day we take that same ordinary faith and put it into action. Here’s what I mean.

If you drove to church today, you had faith that your car would start and get you from your home to here. But if you say you have faith that your car will get you to

church, but you don't get into your vehicle and drive, the whole value of your faith is squandered. It is what the Book of James calls "dead faith" – "faith without works."

You exercise faith when you sit in a chair, trusting that it will not collapse under you. You exercise faith when you deposit your money in the bank, presuming that they are going to take good care of it and not steal it. You exercise faith when you turn on a spigot that the water you'll drink is safe and healthy. But if you say that you trust a chair, then refuse to sit in it, do you really have faith in the chair? If you tell people your money is at bank X, but you won't encourage them to bank there, is your faith true? If you turn on the spigot, but won't use the water, your faith is dead, because you are not taking what's in your head and putting it into action. Abraham and Sarah had faith, but their faith needed to grow to trust that what the Lord promised would happen, and that His very character is faithful and true.

In Romans 12:3, Paul writes that God has given to each of us "a measure of faith" – some more and some less. Just as God didn't make any of us carbon copy templates of one another in our looks or personality or character – so in the measure of faith, we differ from one another. Two people can each be "full of faith," but one's capacity is greater than the other's. The issue is not the quantity we have, but what we do with what we have.

We were not all born with the same physical attributes. Some of us are skinny and some are heavier. Some are tall and some are short. Some are naturally stronger than others, and so on. But what we all have in common is that we all have muscles. Without muscles we would be like blobs of jello, unable to move ourselves or anything else. The degree to which we exercise and how healthy we are determine to a large extent how much we can do with our muscles. So we can increase our muscular capacity and endurance through regular exercise. If we don't exercise, we get fatty and flabby, and grow weaker than we are capable of being.

The same is true of faith. We were all given a measure of faith by God. We all have the ability to grow and strengthen our faith by enhancing our confidence in the promises of God. We do this through spending quality time in prayer, and by enriching our knowledge of God through reading His Word. Romans 10:17 states that "faith comes by hearing [and thus knowing] the word of God."

The more we feed our minds and our spirits with the Word of God, the more we will naturally act on that Word. The more we act on the Word, and put our faith into action, the more we strengthen and increase our faith. By trusting and doing, we learn and see for ourselves that God is absolutely faithful and totally trustworthy. But what if we hear and know His Word, but never act on it? Jesus compares us then to the foolish man who built his house on the sand; it may look nice and do for a while, but it will never stand in times of trial.

So the person who is intent on working out and building his or her muscles does not shy away from the gym, but welcomes the opportunity to get on the machines. Even when it is often tough going and they don't feel like getting on the stairclimber, they don't quit. Why? Because they are looking beyond the present sweat, and huffing and puffing, and aches and pains, to the slimmer, trimmer physique and the sense of well-being that goes with it. They have their eyes on the prize, and put their faith into action to reach the goal.

Christ's disciples are not to shy away from those moments that stretch our endurance and test our faith, that cause us sometimes to huff and puff, and toil and sweat in our spirits. Through God's Word that we trust in faith and act upon, we know that our loving heavenly Father has permitted this test not to crush and destroy us, but to grow and strengthen our confidence in Him. Genuine faith is not a static thing, but a living, dynamic part of who Christians are as the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts.

Even more, there is a wonderful reward for faithfulness that lies beyond the test. This is not our motive for loving the Lord, but it is a great comfort that we cherish and look forward to. This prize outshines and surpasses any material gain we might achieve this side of eternity.

For someone with true faith, there will be no greater joy than beholding the smile of our Lord Jesus Christ as He says on that final day, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful in a few things. I will now set you over much. Come, enter into the joy of your Master."

So think about the challenges that you personally face in your lives, as individuals and as families. Think about the challenges faced by this congregation. And even think about those faced by our community and nation. As you reflect on them, I ask you the

same question that the angel asked elderly Abraham and Sarah in 2100 B.C. “Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

If you respond in your heart of hearts, “No, nothing is too hard for the Lord,” then I encourage you to take that faith, and be sure to put it into action. Pray that the Lord will show you how He wants to use your faith, and continue to be open to having your faith stretched and exercised. Build your faith up with a healthy diet of prayer, worship, and Bible study. Encourage others to trust in the Lord, so they too can be blessed with saving faith in Jesus Christ.

“Is anything too hard for the Lord?” If your answer with your head says, “No,” and your heart adds, “but...,” then I urge you to seek the Lord with all your heart, and don’t lean on your own understanding. Ask the Lord to give you the spiritual strength to trust Him, and obey. Pray that He will take your flabby, fatty faith, and give you a merciful, loving faith-lift. As you do this, keep in mind that the Lord usually does not do miracles to cause people to have faith. The Lord usually does miracles to affirm and encourage those who already have faith. When Jesus went to His hometown, many there struggled to have faith because they saw Him as just the carpenter’s Son, not the Messiah. What was the result? According to Matthew 13, “Jesus said to them, “Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor.”⁵⁸ And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.”

Last but not least, if you honestly answered, “Yes, there are things that seem too hard for the Lord,” I invite you to search the Scriptures and learn about all the amazing works God has accomplished. Speak to Christians who have seen God do marvelous things, including miracles, and I am one of them. Invite the Lord into your life so you can see with new eyes the glory of God day in and day out. Our great and loving God is the Lord Almighty, and there truly is nothing that He cannot do. May each of us have the faith to say wholeheartedly and with strong conviction, “No, there is absolutely nothing that God cannot do,” and may we act boldly to prove our precious gift of faith to be true.

Let us pray.