

Genesis 15:1-6

¹ After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, *“Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”* ² But Abram said, *“O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”* ³ And Abram said, *“You have given me no offspring, so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.”* ⁴ But the word of the LORD came to him, *“This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.”* ⁵ He brought him outside and said, *“Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.”* Then he said to him, *“So shall your descendants be.”* ⁶ And he believed the LORD, and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³ By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance, and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ By faith, with Sarah’s involvement, he received power of procreation, even though he was too old, because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, *“as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”*

¹³ All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴ for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better homeland, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Luke 12:32-34

³² *“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”*

³³ *Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.* ³⁴ *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*

SERMON: Belief & Trust: Receiving the Approval of God

Hebrews teaches that faith is the assurance of things hoped for – but how does “assurance” manifest itself in our lives? How do we know that we are living our faith?

Living our faith is about believing in the promises of God to the point that our belief affects our actions, from the decisions we make to the way that we put our decisions into practice.

Since the Age of Modernity began, humanity has learned to put more trust in scientific thought and reasoning, and now in technology, than in God acting in our best interests. I fear that we will eventually trust in Artificial Intelligence too much, as it becomes fully integrated into our daily lives...trusting to the point that we lose the ability to think and choose for ourselves. I, for one, do not care to place blind trust in AI, because to do so would be to place my faith in what humans can create, instead of in God.

Don't get me wrong, I know that AI can be useful, especially since it tends to "think" in decidedly different ways than I do. Doing online searches assisted by AI can turn up some, shall we say "interesting" results at times. In that way, it is much like living in a community – it can help me see things that go beyond my own perspective. But AI is neither good nor bad – it is indifferent, or perhaps "neutral" would be a better way to put it. Being non-sentient, it lacks a moral compass, using calculations and difference engines to make suggestions or decisions about what I am searching for.

Being non-sentient, it cannot feel, although it can be taught to mimic human emotions, not all of which are positive. Why would we want to trust something that is a poor copy of something that is an incomplete image of God? After all, that is what AI is – humanity's attempt to make something that can think and make decisions... In some ways, it is our attempt at creation – making something out of nothing, something that can learn to think for itself, hoping that it will make us proud and be of use in this world.

Isn't that part of our reason for being?...why God created humans? He did not create us perfect, but created us to grow, giving us the opportunity to learn to form relationships with him and one another. He even created this world as a place that would both sustain us and provide a unique space for us to learn to care for his creation, like he cares for it and for us – for we are the created in God's eyes, no less than AI is the created in the eyes of humanity.

And isn't that also part of why we have children – so that our influence in the world can continue long after we have left the world behind? But AI is not a child. And it is being given power in the world that far exceeds what you would give even a child, power that reflects the trust its creators are willing to give it more than the trust WE would place in it, as it becomes part of the technologies that we allow ourselves to depend upon in daily life.

AI does not deserve such trust from us. Trust is one side of faith, with belief being the other side. These sides are inseparable, like the two sides of a coin. One always goes with the other...

We would call ourselves people of faith, by which we mean faith in God, as we understand God through Christ. We believe in God as the ultimate good, who transcends time and space, being **omnipresent** (present everywhere at every time, all at once) and **omnipotent** – all powerful. Only God is *worthy* of our faith – of belief that leads to trust, which affects all our actions and decisions. In God we can place our assurance and find hope for the future, not in AI. So, before we move on and develop today's message about receiving the approval of God, let me encourage you to remain both cautious and skeptical where AI is concerned – always question the decisions artificial intelligence would make for you, and be careful how much power over your life that you relinquish into its control. For **such relinquishment implies a trust beyond which AI can ever be worthy.**

I brought up AI as a modern example of faith placement, whether it is intentionally or unintentionally placed there. Too many of our actions in life are taken noncommittally, without direct intention and thought. Doing this, we give too much power to other forces in our lives, forces to which we would never intentionally become subservient, for these forces do not reflect what we claim to believe.

It is not just in our *modern* age that humanity prefers to trust what can be seen – what our eyes would tell us, what our reason can support. Abraham faced this conundrum. His were the eyes of a centenarian – he had lived 100 years without an heir being born to him. His wife of the majority of those years had never conceived. Time had proven her barren, and humans tend to trust the test of time.

After so many years, his hope of an heir had dwindled to the point that he began to question God's promises, began to question God himself, saying, *"O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"* This question reflects a momentary lapse of faith in God over faith in what his eyes and life experience could tell him. He even made indirect accusations against God, that God was not making good on his promises, stating that *"You have given me no offspring, so a slave born in my house is to be my heir."* Such is what I refer to as "worldly" thinking – **believing in what the material world and its people would tell you over what God promises to those who stand assured in their faith.**

We all have such weak moments, moments when we question God. When tragedies strike, as so many have in our world of late, we often question. When children are lost in floodwaters, we ask God where he was in that moment... When a person drives their car into a building, killing children and teachers and helpers in a place thought to be safe from such concerns...When the earth itself shakes, destroying homes and businesses, causing tsunamis that affect even distant coastland communities...when innocent families starve in war zones and the aid that is sent is stolen from their mouths and the aid-workers attacked...whether such tragedies strike home in our own lives or others'...we question. We question because we want only good to come to us in life, believing that we have been promised protection from all of life's uncertainties as children of God...but God never promised us easy lives. God promised us that he is always there for us, that we can find strength in him to endure such hardships, and that goodness, mercy, and grace are ours through Jesus Christ. Christ will help us bear our burdens, lightening their weight upon us, so that we can find rest. God makes many promises to humanity, and God is faithful. In this, we must learn to reflect him better. Yet God knows this, and we have our lifetimes to learn to do so.

There have been times that God has made very specific promises to certain people – and Abraham is an example of this. Before today's Old Testament reading, in Genesis 12:1-3, God had promised him *"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."* Yet God did not rebuke him for his momentary wavering of faith. Instead, he offers Abraham assurance that he could count on God's faithfulness over what his eyes and customs would lead him to believe. God reiterated his promise of an heir, and we are told that Abraham believed once more, although the promise was not yet manifested and everything he knew from life pointed to the absurdity of such a promise. This is what makes it faith – he allowed himself to be assured by God's promises.

Because he continued in faith, he received approval from God.

Our reading from Hebrews pointed to his heir, Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob, who were heirs of the promise that God made to Abraham to make his offspring numerous and bless the world through his line. We are told that they, too, "died in faith without having received the promises," and yet "from a distance they saw and greeted them." These descendants of Abraham, these heirs of the promise, grew in faith, and so grew to know and trust in the eternal perspective of our omnipresent God. They were willing to look beyond their own lives, lives which had come about through God's promise of procreation to Abraham the centenarian, and trust that God is faithful to them with a faith that spans generations, not one mere human lifetime. This is truly seeing from a distance! This is trusting in the promises of God to the point of making decisions in full trust of goodness to come in the future, if not in their lifetime, then in those of their children or their children's children...

Just as Jesus admonished and taught his followers, Isaac and Jacob put aside their fears in life, and acted as if they lived in the kingdom of God now, here on earth, trusting in God's power to bring good out of evil, justice despite their own sinful acts or the sinful acts of others. They sought the treasures that only come by the hand of God, putting aside also the desires of the flesh that they might amass treasure in heaven. Their hearts, therefore, remained dedicated to God, and so their actions flowed naturally out of such faith, even though they may not have flowed easily.

This is the faith we are to seek, despite the troubled times in our world, even amidst the tragedies that befall our world. This is why we give alms, meaning giving aid to the poor, even as our own worldly possessions might be dwindling. We are holding fast to our faith, to the love of God and one another, and acting in generosity because we trust in God's abundance, not giving in to the worldly mindset of scarcity. Placing our faith in God, we find assurance and hope through Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God, which is our eternal inheritance that has been poured out upon us even now, while we yet live on earth. For this world has been prepared by God as our learning ground, the growing ground for our faith. It is not this world, this country, this state, or even this community in which we find our hope. Rather, it is through the faith of God's children that this community, state, country, and world bear witness to the hope that only comes through faith in God.

From this truth comes God's word for all of you today: Live your faith. Believe in God alone. Believe in his promises of blessings to the nations that come to all through Jesus Christ, who came through David, who came from the line of Abraham. Let your trust grow from these beliefs, not from all you see happening around you. Do not allow yourself to falter. And yet, know that if you do, if you question, God is there to reassure you, to reiterate the promises he has given to all his children. All you have to do is seek such reassurance through prayer, through listening to the Spirit, and through reading the word of God so that you can learn to understand just what God has promised his children. It is on this topic that I plan to preach in the weeks to come, leaving behind the lectionary for a while. It is my hope, as your spiritual leader, to help you come to understand the promises of God, that you might make your stand against all worldly thinking and teachings, and, like Abraham, receive the approval of our heavenly Father.

To God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be all glory forever and ever. Amen.