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Reconciliation. Bringing together two feuding parties and making them friends, is hard, hard work. I was in the shopping centre recently and ran into someone I know and they said to me, "I know one of your relatives." Which one? Oh, that one!

It seems that most families have at least one relative that is on the outer. Who has said something, done something, hated someone and it has caused a rift within the family. And to bring them back into the fold is hard work. Someone has to take the initiative. Someone has to sit down and listen to both sides of the story. Someone has to be willing to forgive and forget. And that is never, ever easy.

But let me tell you that God knows all about family spats, about people on the outer and about reconciliation. He made the world, he made people and with almost their first act they disobeyed his word and caused a rift between God and man. And that rift led to fighting, murder, pride, arrogance, war that has caused further problems. But now God wants reconciliation. He doesn't want to be at war anymore with mankind, so he chooses Abram out of all the people on the earth. And it will be through Abram that God will restore his relationship with those he has created, mankind.

1. God's part

So when reconciliation is needed, God takes the initiative. He doesn't sit back and say, "No, they were the one at fault. It's their problem, not mine. They hurt me so I will hurt them in return." No God takes the initiative. God appears to Abram. God says to Abram in chapter 15, verse 1, "*Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.*"

Someone had to take the initiative and in Genesis it always seems to be God who does so. He appears to Abram in Ur in Genesis 12 and gives him those great promises. "*I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you. I will make your name great. I will bless the whole world through you.*"

God appears to Abram in chapter 15, when Abram is having some doubts about how God would make him into a great nation, when he still doesn't have any children of his own at age 86. God in chapter 17 gives Abram a sign that he will keep his side of the agreement, by giving him the sign of circumcision. God throughout the Bible always seems to take the initiative.

But reconciliation needs more than just someone willing to take the first step. So God backs up the initiative with some promises. "I will be your shield, Abram." I will protect you. The world is a dangerous place. It is difficult to be on your own. So I will shield you from the evil intent of those around you. "I will be your very great reward." "I will give you as many descendents as there are stars in the sky."

Look up at the sky God says. "Every time you try and count the stars up there, you will get a sense of how many descendants you will have in the end. Abram believe me, because this is my promise to you."

I remember a few Federal elections back that John Howard got in trouble over his promises to the electorate. Remember he had made certain promises and then when he was elected and hadn't kept some of his promises, he divided his earlier undertakings into core promises and non-core promises.

So we can't always trust what other people say to us, even if they make a promise to us. Even if they say "Cross my heart and hope to die." But here God is saying to Abram, there is no such thing as core promises and non-core promises. Whatever I say, I will do. And to prove it God tells Abram to do what the people of Abram's time used to do to ratify a formal agreement, a covenant, a treaty.

They would get a number of birds and animals and kill them. Cut them in half and then make a path between their two sides. And in those days the two parties who were making an agreement would walk between the cut up bodies of the animals, to show each other what would happen to any party who didn't keep their word. Death would come to either side if they didn't keep their end of the bargain.

But do you notice that with the agreement with Abram, with the reconciliation of God and mankind, that only God passed through the animals? For when the sun set and darkness had fallen, a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. God did not walk through the pieces with Abraham, for God was the only one making any promises. This reconciliation between God and man was not dependent upon both doing their bit. God was making all the promises. And God was the one, the only one, who would determine whether this reconciliation was going to be successful or an absolute failure.

If you were to summarise what God does in this chapter in one word, you would use the word, Grace. Grace. God graciously seeks to reconcile with mankind, even though it is not God's fault that their relationship was broken. God makes some promises, that he binds himself to, and God will take on Himself any of the punishment if the relationship breaks down in the future.

Amazing isn't it? Amazing grace, that the unchangeable God would do something to bring God and mankind back together. Which means those promises that God made to Abram are still relevant to his descendants today. God is the one who still takes the initiative, calling us back to Himself, to have our sins forgiven and be reconciled with Him. God is the one who still makes all the promises. I will be with you until the ends of the earth. I will forgive you your transgressions. I will be your God and you will be my people.

But what is even more amazing is that many, many years later, when mankind were continually walking away from God's grace, that he sent his Son Jesus to this world. He came as a man. He continually trusted in God's grace and one day he died on that cross to reconcile us back to God. It was like God Himself not only walked through the carcasses, but

He walked through the valley of the shadow of death. God's grace, God's initiative, God's word is so strong, that he keeps his side of the bargain as well as man's side of the bargain.

Reconciliation. It's hard, hard work but God has certainly put in hard yards to bring us back to Himself. So if God's part is characterised by grace, what should Abram do in response? What is man's part?

2. Man's Part is Faith.

For Abraham hears the promises of God, he trusts in the promises of God, he believes in the promises of God and the Lord, according to verse 6, credits it to him as righteousness. He gets his righteousness, his right standing with God, not due to a reward for all his good works. It is not his salary, his pay, for all the good things he has done. It is credited to him. It is given to him. It is gifted to him.

Now the New Testament tells us that this is one of the most important verses in the whole Bible. 400 hundred years before the coming of the Ten Commandments. Some 1500 years before the coming of Jesus. God is laying down his precedent. If you want to be reconciled with me, then you need to respond to my grace with faith. Don't try and prove your righteousness to me. Don't think that by your obedience you will pass the test. Open up your hand and take what I am giving to you. Trust me. Rely upon me. Accept the gracious offer that I give to you. Accept it by faith.

Paul will pick up this passage in Romans 4 verse 19 and says this, *"Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead--since he was about a hundred years old--and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being **fully persuaded** that God had power **to do what he'd promised**. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but **also for us**, to whom God **will credit righteousness** -- for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."*

But the difficulty with this is that it seems we are not doing enough. All we are doing is waiting, trusting, believing. And so the temptation then is to try and justify who we are by adding something to our faith. God will be really please if I tithe every week my income. If I never miss coming to Church. If I teach Sunday school. If I go on the Church cleaning roster.

But any addition to faith is ultimately a subtraction. Any attempt to reconcile with God based on what I do, belittles what God has already done. So we don't respond to God's grace primarily through works, or through devotion but through trust, through faith.

But there is another response to grace that is also a temptation. And this is what Abram does in the very next chapter, chapter 16. That is, instead of trusting God that He will keep his promises, we try and cut corners, so that we can fix our problems ourselves.

So many years have passed since God has given Abram his gracious promise that your descendents will occupy the Promised Land, but nothing has happened. They are getting

desperate. Their faith is being stretched. Doubts are beginning to appear. Maybe God needs our help, after all God helps those who help themselves, doesn't he?

So Sarai comes up with a plan. Why don't we help God along by you sleeping with my maid servant Hagar? You can then have children through her, we adopt them and so the promises of God will come true. Before the days of IVF, of test tube babies, of surrogate motherhood, this was one way that a childless couple could have their own heirs. But in this situation it was like saying to God, your plan, plan A, hasn't worked, so we are going to try our plan and call it plan B

Well as one preacher has put it, "Abraham is referred to in the Bible as a man of great faith, but he must have been a few cheeseburgers shy of a happy meal during all this. Guys let me give you some advice. If your wife comes to you like Sarah did in a moment of lapse judgment and says it's okay to sleep with another woman, don't believe her. Ladies do you understand why Sarah was upset with Abraham? I think she wanted Abraham to say, "No honey, if you and I can't have a child together, we won't have one."

But that was what they did and because it wasn't God's plan it all went horribly, horribly wrong. Hagar does get pregnant, she's done what Sarah couldn't do. And it says there in verse 4, she starts despising her mistress. And Sarah does the wife thing and blames Abram, and calls down God's judgement on him. And Abram does the **husband thing** and ducks the issue altogether. She's all yours, says Abram - she's in your hands. And Sarah treats Hagar so badly that she flees into the desert.

Once again mankind's actions have made things worse rather than better. But God is still gracious and even when everyone else rejects Hagar, God doesn't. He finds her running away, he talks to her, he makes promises to her and he sends her back to her rightful place with Abram. So that he can look after them. For those who are close to Abraham are the ones who have the greatest chance of receiving God's blessings.

What this incident is showing is that even in the midst of sin, of doubt, of human disobedience, God is still doing his work. As someone has rightly pointed out, "Yes it is true - God's heavenly plans sometimes make no earthly sense." But God's promises don't mean that you get what you want when you want it. It doesn't even mean you get what God wants you to get when you want it. For the thing about faith, is that it is often tested by waiting.

Harold Wilke was born with no arms and one time when he was a preschooler he was struggling to get his shirt over his head and shoulders. He said, "I was grunting and sweating and my mother just stood there and watched." A relative turned to his mother and said, "Ida, why don't you help the child?" His mother responded through gritted teeth, "I am helping him." That's true isn't it? Sometimes God stands by in silence and does nothing because it actually helps us mature.

A 4-year-old boy was travelling with his mother & constantly asking the same question over & over again? "When are we going to get there? When are we going to get there?" Finally, the mother got so irritated that she said, "We still have 90 more miles to go. So don't ask me

again when we're going to get there." Well, the boy was silent for a long time. Then he timidly asked, "Mum, will I still be four when we get there?"

To a small child, a 3 hour car ride seems like an eternity. But to an adult a 3 hour car ride is not so long because an adult has experienced time. To God a few years on earth seems like a few seconds because he has experienced eternity. And we sometimes appear to him like the child constantly nagging from the back seat, God when is this going to happen. When God? When?

I know that it is hard to wait. It's even harder when God appears to be saying no to the things we want him to say yes to. But that's where our faith needs to kick in. Has God actually promised to give you what you want? Are you trying to help God out with actions that may be less than wise? Are you willing to go without some of the things you really, really want in order to place your trust fully in God?

This passage shows us that we are saved by grace and that we need to respond to that grace with faith. But how does that actually work in practise? Well let me give a few, brief pointers from our last chapter, chapter 17.

3. The Result

A number of more years pass and God appears to Abram again. Now he is 89 years old and Sarai is just a decade or so behind him. And this time, God fills out what is required by the life of faith.

He says in verse 1, that the person of faith is expected to have a new walk. A life that is characterised by us walking before God. Salvation isn't just a one off event. It's about a daily walk before God. We walk in his presence with nothing to hide from him. The man who has been saved by grace is not going to half heartedly serve their God, but will single-mindedly live in such a way that God will always be pleased.

A person who has been saved by grace will have a new walk and a new name. Just as Abram becomes Abraham & Sarai becomes Sarah, so we now are named a Christian. We now have Christ's name because we are now part of his family. And because we bear the family name, we should over time bear the family likeness, we should become more and more like Jesus.

There is also a new sign and for Abraham that is circumcision. Every male in his household over 8 days old should be circumcised as a sign that they are part of God's family. They will cut away part of their most intimate part of their body, to illustrate the fact that God wants to have access to the innermost areas of our hearts. This will set Abraham and his household apart from everyone else. Other people in that region may have circumcised their children but most did it at puberty. But here God was saying it is not just when you become a man do you become part of my promises. It is from birth that you come under my protective custody.

As a brief aside when we had Samuel born, Kaylene and I had to decide whether we would have him circumcised. God told Abram and his descendents to do it, so although it might be painful at the time it can't be bad for our children. But in the New Testament the sign of the

new covenant isn't circumcision, its baptism and so it is not compulsory for parents to circumcise their children today. They must then decide whether to circumcise or not to circumcise on health reasons, not on religious reasons.

What we can do is baptise our children, as infants. For that is a sign of being a part of the people of God. And if done as a child, then it is also a picture of God's grace, washing this child of their sins, bringing them into the family of God. They can't contribute anything, so they must be saved by grace. But as they grow up they take on a Christian walk, they live as Christians, it's more than just a name and they enjoy the other sign of being a part of the family of God, the Lord's Supper.

Remember, when God made His promises, he keeps them. His ways do not change. In the beginning he graciously chose Abram and asked him to respond in faith and today he still graciously chooses his people and asks us to also respond in faith and with the corresponding actions that back up that faith.

For despite popular opinion, **faith is not just a feeling**. It's a commitment. It's about taking God at His word. So let me end with a story about Christopher Columbus. Back in 1492, he wanted to sail west to get to India. And a lot of people said he was crazy. "India is the other way, you big dummy! If you go west, you're going to fall off the end of the earth, because the world is flat!" But Columbus believed with all of his heart that the world was round. You know why? Because he believed in the Bible. Isaiah 40:22 says that God "sits above the CIRCLE of the earth." The Hebrew word for circle refers to something shaped like a sphere. And so Columbus figured, "If the world is shaped like a sphere, I should be alright no matter which way I go. All I have to do is believe the written word of God."

As you and I know, Columbus didn't fall off the edge of the earth, because he trusted the word of God. And if you and I are men and women of faith we will take the grace of God offered to us and then by faith trust God's word. And doing that will mean we will not fall off the edge of the earth, instead we will be right in the middle of God's will.