

# LIVING TRUST

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Genesis 17: 1-7 - Covenant with Abraham  
Psalm 22: 23-31 (responsive reading), *Voices United*, p. 746  
Mark 8: 31-38 - Jesus foretells his death and resurrection  
Romans 4:13-25 - Abraham's faith reckoned to him as righteousness

I can understand, Harry [Gaede, lector], your sense of being overwhelmed by those texts. [At the conclusion of his reading, Harry had beseeched God to help us in our understanding--with Rev. Jim's assistance!] There are indeed volumes of Christian spirituality, faith, and theology contained in those passages--some of the very most important of our whole faith tradition. Beginning with the covenant with Abraham the Hebrew tradition is a series of covenants. And that thread of the tradition of covenant, of God entering into a mutually-promised relationship with people, is at the heart of what the Old Testament tells us about the nature of life. Here is the covenant with Abraham, a simple promise that there were going to be descendants, a whole nation, a whole race of people, coming from Abraham and Sarah. Abraham's response is simply to follow in promise.

Although covenant is at the centre, the passage begins with God calling Abraham to be blameless before the Lord. That word "blameless" is also used in the Book of Job. That Book is a story about someone who is "blameless," and it explores the dilemma of how horrible things can happen to someone who is blameless. It's an important idea because it's at the heart of what for many of us is the good life. How can we go through life day to day, week to week, year to year, making all the choices that we must make as we decide each step in our lives, and somehow know that they are the right choices? How can we make our way through this myriad of choices and come out blameless? The word "blameless" has a sense of some kind of innocence. How can we be right? So here's God telling Abraham to be blameless before God, and then giving this covenant promise and calling Abraham and Sarah to follow in trust.

I want to share a few other passages about this promise, this everlasting covenant that God makes with people, because that language comes up again and again and again throughout the scriptures. Here is a sampling. Earlier in Genesis (9:16, New Revised Standard Version) in the story of Noah: "When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." Also from Genesis (17:19, NRSV) but later on in the story in relation to son Isaac: "Your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him." And then from the book of the prophet Isaiah (54:10, NRSV): "For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has

compassion on you.” From the prophet Jeremiah (50:5, NRSV): “They shall ask the way to Zion, with faces turned toward it, and they shall come and join themselves to the Lord by an everlasting covenant that will never be forgotten.” Finally, from Ezekiel (37:26, NRSV): “I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore.” This promise is repeated like a litany throughout the entire Hebrew tradition.

This covenant promise gives to the people throughout the century a way of life that requires only a trust. It’s the sense there is that silver thread running through life, and we can’t see very far ahead. It’s not the same pattern or path for everybody. As a matter of fact sometimes it’s a very, very, unique path. But our endeavour to live faithfully is simply to discern that thread that leads us through our lives. That’s the everlasting covenant God gives us--to trust in God’s lead throughout life.

Now I’m going to jump over Mark for a minute all the way up to the Romans passage where Paul reflects on this covenant and this endeavour to achieve the blamelessness, the righteousness, the innocence in life; and talks about how we do that. Most of what he is talking about in Romans is Torah, reinterpreting the tradition of the Law and the dilemma of how we can know the laws--the rules God gave--and to follow them closely enough to be blameless before God. Paul’s answer is, basically, we can’t so forget it; we can’t achieve our righteousness, our blamelessness, by following the rules. And then he makes his most powerful illustration of that point by pointing out that Abraham trusted God and God counted that--the trusting, the following--as his righteousness. His righteousness wasn’t, of course, the result of Abraham following the Law; the Law wasn’t given until hundreds of years after Abraham lived. So this way of righteousness is a way of trusting God. That’s Paul’s point. We live by faith alone. We are given our innocence, our goodness, our blamelessness simply on the basis of our trust in God. That’s Paul’s interpretation of the covenant with Abraham.

And then we come to Mark’s story of Jesus speaking at this dramatic turning point in his ministry. It’s chapter eight. There are sixteen chapters in Mark, so it is half way through. Until then, Jesus has been in Galilee doing his preaching and teaching and healing--building this movement. Now, at this point, the turning point, he starts moving toward Jerusalem and, eventually, the Passion and Crucifixion in Jerusalem. But at this turning point he starts talking about the death and resurrection, and Peter challenges him: “No, you’ve got to be crazy.” Jesus then explains, probably for the first time, that he has talked this deeply about how it is with our lives, with our souls.

He tells Peter and the other disciples that if they try to save their souls, if their lives are about saving their own souls, then they lose their souls. Now, just a comment on the translation: Various translations use different words, and the scripture Harry [Gaede] read used the word “life,”--if you seek to save your “life” you lose it. Later on it asks what a person can gain who gains the whole world and loses his or her “soul.” Some translations switch from “life” to “soul,” but it’s the same word in Greek all the way through. Because it is usually translated as “soul,” I’m going to use that translation. If you live to save your own soul you lose it. The word “lose” is actually a little stronger than that. It’s not quite as passive as “lose” in English. It’s a little more like you give up your soul, you forfeit it. Or it’s even stronger in some contexts in the sense that you

destroy your soul. So you can even interpret the endeavour to save your own soul as soul-destroying. That's what Jesus is saying. And then he turns it around and says if you lose (let go, destroy) your own soul for the sake of the gospel, or if you give (forfeit, dedicate, let go of) your soul for the sake of him, Christ--that is, if you "lose" (et cetera) your soul for Christ's sake and for the sake of the gospel--you save your soul for eternal life. "Eternal life!" Hear that language's echo of the everlasting covenant that runs through the entire Hebrew tradition. If we let our souls go for Christ's sake and for the sake of the gospel, then our souls are saved.

One aspect of the evangelizing kind of talk among Christian denominations for whom evangelizing is central, the talk with which I am the most uncomfortable, is that which starts to sound as if the centre of our purpose in our spiritual lives is our own salvation. There is so much language about "Are you saved?" "How are you going to be saved?" It is as if the central purpose of our whole spiritual life is our own salvation. However, in my opinion Jesus in this passage is saying precisely the opposite. We destroy our souls when the focus of our intention is entirely on our own salvation. Only when we let that go, only when we entrust our salvation to God and let it go, do our souls come back to us.

Many years ago a very dear friend of mine, who was a budding painter, painted a picture and gave it to me. We had shared some very significant experiences in group programs that took us into the heart of what I have been talking about this morning, and she painted a picture that was simply a pump--you know, like the old hand pump on the well--sitting out in the middle of nowhere almost as if it had been abandoned. A bucket was sitting beside the pump, and a little piece of paper--sort of an old illegible tattered note--was attached. Just a pump and a bucket and a note. She explained to me that the note said there is water in the bucket but not to use it because the pump has to be primed. All of that water must be poured into the pump. When that is done and you began pumping, you will have all the water you need. But if you use the water in the bucket, you have nothing. You have to let it go, you have to give it up, and then it comes back as rich and plentiful as you could ever want.

And so, when Jesus talks about taking up our cross he refers to those times when life becomes burdensome and painful. But it's not the burden or the pain that really bothers us. It's the fear that they will be too much and will overwhelm us. It's the fear that we will go in the wrong direction, make mistakes, and destroy our lives because we have made wrong choices. It's the fear that we will lose our innocence and our blamelessness, and either won't know what to do or won't be able to do what we must.

Through all this talk about covenant and everlasting life and letting go, the message is very simple: Take up our cross no matter how burdensome or how challenging life becomes. Only trust God, only find that silver thread, and that will give us the blamelessness, the innocence, the righteousness, the success, the wisdom, the fullness of life for which we long. If we do that, we will be handed a sheer gift, sheer grace.

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor