

PATIENCE

Sometimes we are tempted to become impatient with God: it is not that we do not believe Him or do not believe His Gospel or do not believe His promises.

Rather that we see time passing years passing. Then doubts spring up. We ask: when will what God told me or even promised me happen? Is it even possible, in the first place?

We may learn about this matter by considering events in the life of Abraham — a man, whom God Himself deemed righteous for the belief that he always had in God.

The story begins when Abraham was already 75 years old — quite advanced in age (although he lived to 175). God chose him, called him and made him a promise:

Genesis 13:14b–15 the Lord said to Abram, "Look as far as you can see in every direction—north and south, east and west. ¹⁵I am giving all this land, as far as you can see, to you and your descendants as a permanent possession." [NLT]

The promise sounded great to Abraham, but not applicable nor useful, since Abraham had no descendants and he could not have any, because he and his wife Sarah had no sons. So Abraham endeavored to make the will of God and His promise happen:

Genesis 15:2–3 But Abram replied, "O Sovereign Lord, what good are all your blessings when I don't even have a son? Since you've given me no children, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth. ³You have given me no descendants of my own, so one of my servants will be my heir." [NLT]

Abraham planned to help God fulfill His promise, by proposing to make his chief servant (a sort of member of his extended family) his heir, so that God would have someone to begin build the great nation.

However, God told Abraham: No that is not the plan, when I said "descendants," I meant descendants, that is, your own sons not a makeshift arrangement to make things work for show.

God did not say, but He could have: "Am I not the Almighty? Do I need your intervention to fulfill my plan? And do I have to resort to a makeshift arrangement? When I said descendants, I meant your blood line:

Genesis 15:4 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." [NRSV]

God did not punish Abraham for his fleshly attempt to help God, but He explained His plan unequivocally, so that Abraham would understand. Abraham — as it was his custom — believed the Lord; God was pleased.

Genesis 15:6 And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith. [NLT]

A long time (ten years) passed yet since the original promise of God; furthermore, Abraham's wife, Sara, was in her mid-seventies and barren: thus, it seemed impossible to both of them that she could bear a son. So they devised a Plan B. Abraham yes, would have a son — as God had promised — but from another and possibly more fertile woman.

Genesis 16:1–2 Abram's wife Sarai had not borne any children for him, but she owned an Egyptian slave named Hagar.

²Sarai said to Abram, "Since the Lord has prevented me from bearing children, go to my slave; perhaps through her I can build a family." And Abram agreed to what Sarai said. [HCSB]

This was the second attempt by Abraham to help God fulfill His promise: first with a servant of his household and now with a bastard son.

Genesis 16:15 So Hagar gave Abram a son, and Abram named him Ishmael. [NLT]

God had not prevented this and He did not say anything about it: again many years passed by (more than a dozen years, in fact). Then God did appear, renewed His promise and made it into a formal covenant, where Abraham's part was to practice circumcision for himself and for his entire household.

Genesis 17:10 This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; [NKJV]

At this point, when he heard "descendants" again, Abraham expressed his concern to the Lord very honestly and proposed the fix that he and Sara had engineered by means of his bastard son:

Genesis 17:17–18 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" ¹⁸And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before You!" [NASB]

As we know, that was not God's plan:

Genesis 17:19 But God replied, "No—Sarah, your wife, will give birth to a son for you. You will name him Isaac, and I will confirm my covenant with him and his descendants as an everlasting covenant." [NLT]

So, 25 years after God's original promise, Sarah had a son, Isaac: the son of promise.

Genesis 21:1–2 Then the Lord took note of Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had promised. ²So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him. [NASB]

Paul the Apostle thus summarized all these events:

Galatians 4:23 The son of the slave wife was born in a human attempt to bring about the fulfillment of God's promise. But the son of the freeborn wife was born as God's own fulfillment of his promise. [NLT]

So it is for us when it seems that nothing is happening and that God has forgotten: our patience wears thin. We may also be tempted to think: well such and such is what the Lord wants or what He promised; I believe it and I shall do my best to make it happen so that His will be done on earth.

At that point, we substitute our ways for His ways and we are not doing His will, but ours — because of our lack of patience.

Abraham — a sinner as we all are — tried to do just that, but he was a man whose heart and mind was open to the Lord and was ready to receive and accept correction from the Lord when he made mistakes or transgressed.

From his example, we can learn to trust the Lord, and to recognize that He is Almighty. He wants our obedience, but does not need any help from us. Rather, we must endeavor to know what is His work and what is our job of simple obedience. Sometimes obedience means patience — even beyond what seems possible.