

## Message: “To Be a Blessing”

**“Jump and I’ll catch you.”**

Have you ever said this to a child or heard a parent say this to a child? Do you remember someone saying it to you when you were little?

**Did you trust them and jump?** In a sense, that’s what God is asking us. Our loving God reaches out to make a covenant with us. God starts by making some promises to us. God promises well-being, significance and hope. God promises to be there for us and love us. God is the initiator, the one who acts first, showing they want a relationship with us.

**Assuming we want a relationship with God, what’s our part?**

To live in covenant with God is to trust God. We must believe God’s promise. Only then will we be willing to dare to live in a relationship. There is some risk involved in doing this. But unless we take the risk, we’ll never learn to live in the covenant God wants to make with us.

**God says, “Jump and I’ll catch you.”** Or, in the words of our video, “Trust me, fall back” (see “Trust Fall” video).

**Will you? It’s so simple... but not easy.**

**Perhaps you aren’t ready to answer yet.** Or you’ve heard different opinions about what it means to live in a covenant relationship with God, and you have questions. You don’t agree with some of the opinions you’ve heard, the unchecked oppression and injustice you see, and you’re unsure how the relationship works.

**How can we believe in Love** when our families, friends or partners who claim the Christian faith, seem unable to love or love poorly?

**How do we love when some suffer systemic injustice, which is presented to us as the best we deserve?** As if anyone *deserves* racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia or xenophobia.

**The reality is, those of us who want to learn to give and receive divine tenderness** are going to have to deal with the falsehoods, wounds, and craziness of love that isn’t love.

**How do we do that?**

**Jesus invites us to unlearn ways of life which don't nourish us or strengthen the bonds of beloved community.** We are invited to abandon unquestioning agreement with questionable beliefs. We can wrestle with the scriptures and explore the language and values of the cultures from which they came without abandoning faith.

**And, on the way, we might unravel the lessons of harm,** which can seem synonymous with how God acts in the lives of children. Particularly when harm is done by those in God's church.

**Jesuit priest and homeboy Gregory Boyle** says it this way in his book, *Cherished Belonging: The Healing Power of Love in Divided Times*: "We unlearn what we need to unlearn. I suppose that because we've always insisted on a personified deity, it naturally gets us into trouble. This is where our endless projections pop up. God is soaked through with all our stuff: judgmental, pissed off, suspicious, disappointed. Long is the list of the traits we project [onto God. Yet] God's very nature is infinite compassion, and it's this merciful face of God that's imprinted on the human heart. God is compassionate and merciful, always and in everything."<sup>1</sup>

**Jesus calls us to practice re-learning:** arguing with biblical passages used to serve human aims or justify human hatred. We're invited to the dinner party of Jesus' table, surrounded by the motley crew of other fallible human beings. With the Holy Spirit's help, we are invited to learn and to see human dignity and the face of God even in our enemies, simply because that's also what God sees in us.

**If this sounds familiar,** and you're wrestling with stuff, you're in good company, me and these friends. And just like the church in Rome. It's why Paul wrote to them. We're going to spend some time in his letter over the next few weeks, unlearning and relearning.

**Let's start with a little refresher on Paul's letter.** This wasn't a church Paul started, and he didn't personally know the people. When he wrote, Paul hadn't yet been to Rome. His letter was an introduction to prepare them for a visit Paul was planning to make. But he'd heard rumors about the church.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/learning-tenderness-proper-5-a-june-7-2026/>

**Paul knew the Gentile and Jewish Christians weren't in agreement, and he wanted to help them reconcile.** He wanted to help everyone realize faith in Jesus Christ didn't require conversion to Judaism or legalism. This isn't an anti-Jewish message, but a "greater identity" message. We all have a place in God's kingdom.

**Paul explains how becoming a member of God's covenant group depends on one thing and one thing only: faith.** As proof, Paul holds up as an example the greatest patriarch of them all, good old Abraham.

**Paul wants us to recognize God's promise was to make Abram the founder of many nations, not just one nation.** And to make his point, Paul reminds us Abram wasn't a Jew. He was a Gentile.

**Does this surprise you?** Well, think about it. The nation of Israel was named after Abraham's grandson. Jacob, like his grandfather, received a new name from God as a sign of covenant. Jacob became Israel, and one of his twelve sons, Judah, founded the tribe that became known as the Jewish people today. Abram couldn't have been Jewish, or even an Israelite, because Israel and Judah didn't exist yet.

**Abram** also couldn't obey the Law, because it hadn't been given yet. This wouldn't happen for another eight generations. And yet, God found him to be righteous. Even though Abram was unsure about God at this point, he believed God to be truthful, and trusted God to keep the promise made.

**Abram related to God through his faith,** and so he was considered by God as righteous and justified. N.T. Wright says, "The covenant [dealt] with sin... To have one's sins forgiven, not reckoned up or calculated against one's name, is precisely what God intended when God called Abram in the first place."<sup>2</sup>

**This first act of prevent grace is key to God's plan to pardon and heal sinful human beings.** This is a promise of highest value, for it is based on unconditional love. A promise made with conditions is devalued or has no meaning. It's a bargain, not a commitment. I don't know about you, but making a bargain seems foolish. Trusting and relying on God who promises to love us unconditionally gives us hope!

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<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul For Everyone: Romans, Part 1*, 68.

**Paul then tells us the promise isn't for Abram alone.** It's for us, too. Just as Abram wasn't justified by obeying the Law, we don't become justified or obtain righteousness by following the rules. We become righteous through faith alone. Roscoe and James would argue about this.

**Everyone comes to a covenant relationship with God the same way Abram did: through faith.** All who believe in the resurrected Christ are heirs of Abram. They are children of God. They inherit the promise, which means believing God tells the truth and trusting God to do what Jesus says God will do.

**One verse in this passage jumps out.** Paul says Abram believed God's promise, "*hoping beyond hope*" (v18). Abram knew fulfillment of the promise depended on no life or power he had. There was no basis of hope in himself or in the human condition. All Abram could cling to is the promise. And so, he did. Abram hoped beyond hope, because there wasn't anything else to hope for.

**Abram believed in a promise which seemed impossible to fulfill.** Abram leaned into the covenant, not because it met some fantasy of his own and certainly not because founding nations seemed reasonable and within the realm of possibility.

**Abram believed God,** and God credited it as righteousness for a simple reason: Abram decided God was trustworthy. If God said the impossible would happen, Abram believed it would happen.

**Efrem Smith tells a story about a friend who took their children to the zoo.** The kids were intrigued by the African impalas. As they lingered near the enclosure, they heard a zoo staff member describe some interesting facts about this animal.

**She told them the African impala can jump** thirteen feet straight up in the air from a standing position. This skill protects the impala from predators trying to sneak up behind it. The impala can also jump thirty feet forward from a standing position. And they can run up to 60 miles an hour.

**Then the zookeeper shared something the family had a hard time believing.** The impalas at the zoo are contained by a wall that's only three feet high.

## **How is this possible?**

When impalas are very young, they're trained to believe they can't jump over the wall, because of a weakness they all share. Impalas don't like to jump if they can't see where they're going to land. This hinders the impala from doing something it's naturally able to do, jump.

**Efrem writes**, "The inability to live by faith keeps the impala from doing what God created it to do, what it was born to do. It grows up to become an adult with the ability to jump to freedom and live out its purpose, but it won't because it doesn't believe it can."<sup>3</sup> An impala doesn't know how to "hope beyond hope."

**"In many ways, the Christian life is like a series of jumps** taking us higher and further into a life of intimacy with, and identity in, Christ. It's about the love relationship God desires to have with us, so we know and truly become beloved, advancing the kingdom of God on earth."<sup>4</sup>

**Many times, this involves taking leaps of faith into the unknown.**

The barriers may only be low, but we can't see ahead. Sometimes fear of the unknown paralyzes us and keeps us from jumping into the life God wants for us. All our potential just sits behind a three-foot wall.

**We may not be able to see ahead**, but we know one thing: God is there. We are, by faith, jumping into God's love! We can't see God, but we hear God's voice calling us to love, forgiveness and freedom. Hoping beyond hope, we trust God to be who God is, and to do what Jesus says God will do.

**A final thought: an impala isn't limited to only one leap in its life.**

The impala can jump again and again, each time experiencing freedom.

**When given the opportunity to go to a deeper place of faith with God, will you make the jump?** Even if the leap presents challenges and issues that seem impossible to take on, like trusting God will keep you from falling?

**I invite you to hope beyond hope. This is how we can be the blessing we wish to receive.**

*Let us pray ...*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://pastorsings.com/2015/03/01/hoping-against-hope-sermon-on-romans-413-25-lent-2b/>

<sup>4</sup> Efrem Smith, *Jump into a Life of Further and Higher*, 20-21.

**Romans 4:13-25 (CEB)**

The promise to Abraham and to his descendants, that he would inherit the world, didn't come through the Law but through the righteousness that comes from faith. If they inherit because of the Law, then faith has no effect and the promise has been canceled. The Law brings about wrath. But when there isn't any law, there isn't any violation of the law. That's why the inheritance comes through faith, so that it will be on the basis of God's grace. In that way, the promise is secure for all of Abraham's descendants, not just for those who are related by Law but also for those who are related by the faith of Abraham, who is the father of all of us. As it is written: *I have appointed you to be the father of many nations.* So Abraham is our father in the eyes of God in whom he had faith, the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that don't exist into existence. When it was beyond hope, he had faith in the hope that he would become the father of many nations, in keeping with the promise God spoke to him: *That's how many descendants you will have.* Without losing faith, Abraham, who was nearly 100 years old, took into account his own body, which was as good as dead, and Sarah's womb, which was dead. He didn't hesitate with a lack of faith in God's promise, but he grew strong in faith and gave glory to God. He was fully convinced that God was able to do what he promised. Therefore, it was credited to him as righteousness.

But the scripture that says *it was credited to him* wasn't written only for Abraham's sake. It was written also for our sake, because it is going to be credited to us too. It will be credited to those of us who have faith in the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was handed over because of our mistakes, and he was raised to meet the requirements of righteousness for us.