

My name is Afshin Ziafat. I'm glad to be back at the Village Church. This is my home in Dallas. I'm not in Dallas too often, but when I am, this is my home. So if you've never seen me here, I have a ministry where I travel and preach all over the country, and that's pretty much what I do. So when I'm in Dallas, a lot of times I get to fill in for Matt. So I'm always looking forward to times to be here. This is a church I dearly love. I've been all over the map the last couple of weeks, so I've got to tell you this real quick before we get started. About two weeks ago, I was at the World Series sitting on top of the Green Monster at Fenway Park. And let me just say, it helps to know someone. I have a friend who's in the front office of the Red Sox, so I got to go to the World Series and that was incredible. And then this past week, I was in the Middle East. Those of you who have heard me preach here before will know that I am involved in a ministry where I go three or four times a year for a week at a time to train Iranian pastors or wanna-be pastors, future pastors. I can't go into Iran, but it's a neighboring country. They come and we train them and they go back. So I got the incredible opportunity to go and train. And at the end of the week, some of our former students came from Iran to where we were and we got to have a report and just kind of a little conference. It was incredible, and I actually got back Friday. So literally, I've just flown in and come straight to Dallas to preach here. So I was pretty jet lagged last night and today I'm a little weird, but I've got to tell you this little story before we start because I almost didn't think I would make it here to the Village. I say that kind of jokingly, but I've just got to tell you what happened. My flight was at 5:30 in the morning on Friday, so I left the hotel at 3:00. I got a cab, said good bye to everyone, got all my stuff together, went downstairs, waited for the cab and the cab came around 3:00 in the morning. So I just throw my stuff in, I'm in the back of the cab and I tell the guy to go to the airport and I'm just kind of barely awake. He gets about half a mile down the road, and I notice he's on the phone with someone. I'm like, "Hmm, that's kind of weird. Three in the morning on the phone. Who's up?" He's on the phone with someone and all of a sudden, no joke, about half a mile from the hotel, he pulls over to the side of the road and I see this guy walking up with a black trench coat on the phone with him. He comes over, the driver gets out of the vehicle and gets in the passenger seat and the guy in the trench coat gets in the driver's seat. So now I'm starting to wake up a little bit. And he drives a little bit further down and he drops the original driver off and we're off to somewhere. So I'm just like, "Um, what just happened? Uh, hello Osama, where are we going?" I'm like, "What is going on?" I mean I literally was like, "This is it. This is when it happens. This is when I go to that room with the five guys in the hoods with the AK-47's." And I want you to know, my first thought was, "Mommy!" but my second thought, I was thinking of you. This is weird, but one of my first thoughts was, "If they do take me to where the AK-47 guys are, I wonder if they'll let me have a phone call? Just one phone call so I can call the Village Church and tell them they might need someone to fill in this weekend." I don't know why, but that was my first thought. Anyways, I finally speak up because I'm not just going to let this guy drive. So I don't speak the language of the country that I'm in, I speak Farsi and I just speak in English and say, "Hey uh, who are you? Where are we going?" And so, he turns around and he knows broken Farsi, the language of Iran, and he just kind of says to me, "Are you from Iran?" I'm tell him yeah and we start talking. I'm like, "Hey, I don't know who you are. I'm not comfortable with that, with what just happened, with where we're going." He's like, "I'm the night driver." I'm like, "Yeah right. I'm Little Red Riding Hood okay. Let's go back. Turn this thing around right now." He's like, "No, we're going to the airport. What's the problem?" I go, "Listen, I'm not comfortable. Take me back to the hotel right now. I have no idea who you are."

And so, he curses at me in Farsi and I'm like, "I don't care. I've seen one too many episodes of 24, alright?" So he whips the car around and comes back to the hotel, the manager comes out, all these other people come out and they're like, "What's wrong?" And so, he's yelling at them in some language and they come over to me and ask in English, "What's

wrong, sir?" I'm like, "I'm sorry but I don't know who this guy is." They say, "He's our night driver. He's fine." And I'm like, "Okay, I'm fine now. We can go now." And now, I get back in the car with this guy. Awkward doesn't even begin to describe this. I just for all intents and purposes just accused this guy of being an al-Qaeda terrorist and now I've got to spend 30 minutes in the car with him. Like, where do you go from there? "So um, are you married?" I mean, what do you say after that? So he was kind of ticked off. He was flying like 100mph. He was mad at me, but I'm like, "I don't care. I'm an American, a former Muslim and it's 3:00AM in the Middle East. I don't do the switch-a-roo driver thing on the side of the road. I'm sorry." So we book it to the airport, he gets off, lets me out and it was so funny. He grabs my stuff and threw, I'm not kidding, he threw my bags onto the sidewalk, jumped back into the cab and took off. And I'm standing there thinking, "God bless you and thank you for giving me a great story for my repertoire." But I've got to tell you, I was in the back of that cab just saying, "God, I love You. This is life right now. 3:15 in the morning, I'm in the back of a cab in the Middle East, some guy's ticked off and I'm being driven to the airport. Who says being a Christian's not fun?"

Okay, here's what we're going to do. We're going to pray first, so I want you to bow your heads, close your eyes and we're going to pray. I'm very excited to make it and be here with you. The Lord's put something on my heart for us, and I want you to prepare your heart. Just take a moment and say, "God, speak to me. Speak to my heart. Prepare my heart. I want to hear from You." "Father, we love You. We thank You, God, for your word. We thank You for how Your word speaks to us, equips us, rebukes us, challenges us and encourages us. I pray for hearts, for souls today who are listening, who do not know You or maybe know You and are in this place where the reality of that relationship hasn't taken root in their life, they're running after things maybe. I just pray, God, that you'd speak to our hearts and draw us to what the gospel truly is all about. We love You. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen."

If you're in this room, you're probably like me. Most of us if not all of us are in what I like to call the "gap." Let me explain what I mean. The gap is where God has given us an incredible promise, and incredible call, He's called you to Himself, He's given you this amazing promise and the promise has not yet completely fulfilled. It hasn't been actualized, and so you're living in this gap between the incredible promise and the fulfillment of it. The promise is, we all know the verses, Jesus said, "The thief came to steal, kill and destroy, but I came to give you life and give it to the full." So we're like, "God, You promised me abundant life." We all know Jeremiah 29, "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you, to give you hope and a future, not to harm you." And so, we can quote those back to God, "God, You promised me an incredible future, You made this amazing promise," and maybe what's happened is maybe the child isn't born yet, the marriage isn't happening, the ministry hasn't taken off, the business is failing, I don't know what's going on and you're like, "Is this it? God, where's the abundant life and where are those promises?" It hasn't been actualized and you're living in this gap. So the question is: How do you live? And for most of us, most of our life is in that gap because the ultimate fulfillment of that promise is when we spend eternity with God. And so we have this gap to deal with.

Well, I love that the gospel is not just a New Testament idea. It started in the Old Testament. Galatians 3 says that the gospel was proclaimed to Abraham, saying that "In you, all the nations of the earth will be blessed." Most of Genesis is Abraham living in that gap. Now let me explain. In Genesis 12, he gets an amazing promise from God: "Abraham, go out of your father's country, go out of this land, and I'm going to make you a great nation." And the greatest promise He makes in Genesis 12 to Abraham is this, that "Through you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed." That's talking about Jesus, that "You will have many descendants, but your ultimate descendant, the descendant, Jesus will be a blessing, will be a blessing not just for Israel, not just for your people but it's going to spread out to all the gentiles in all the world. Through you, you get to be a part of Me and Me going out." That was an amazing promise that he got. Well then he lives in this gap. In Genesis 14, he has this incredible victory. Lot gets captured and Abraham goes, the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, he helps king Melchizedek, he gets this incredible victory and the king of Sodom comes up and says to him he wants to give him blessing and possessions. And he says, "Look, I've made a covenant with God. I'm not going to touch anything that you give me because I don't want anyone to say, that you rewarded me." In other words what

he's saying is he's showing his incredible faith that "God is the one that takes care of me." And let me say something really quick to you. Most of the times I start groaning and grumbling with God and "Where are Your promises?" after a great victory in my life. Like I come back from the Middle East and I say, "God, come on man. I was over there, the facilities weren't that good, I suffered for you..." And we start to throw out stuff we've done for Him. "...I trained these guys. I was in harm's way." All this stuff we say and then, "God, where are Your promises?" And we're going to see the same thing for Abraham.

Turn to Genesis 15 with me. In Genesis 15, right after this victory, Abraham starts to kind of grumble with God. God knows that in his heart, Abraham's wondering if God has forgotten His promise. So in verse 1, God speaks to him. "After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: 'Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' 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?' And Abram said, 'Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.'" What he's saying here is this. There's a Mesopotamian custom at the time where if you don't have a child, you just take your servant to be your heir. And basically what he's doing here is he's trying to help God with His plan. "God, You haven't come through with Your plan, You haven't given me a child by my wife, so obviously it must be Eliezer." And he's trying to help God, he's trying to say, "Here God, let's try to usher in Your promise because You're not moving." And I think that's what we do many times. We see God not working the way we think He ought to work or it hasn't happened in the time that we think it should happen and so we start to put our hands in God's plan. And he tragically does this in the next chapter as you know. In Genesis 16, he sleeps with Hagar, his maid-servant. And he says, "If You're not going to give me a son, then I'm just going to have to take matters into my own hands and sleep with my maid-servant. And he has Ishmael and God says, "Look, I see Ishmael, but your wife Sarah will give you a son. My plan will carry out." I've found out that most of the times in my life when I try to help God with His plan, all I do is just kind of delay the process and all I do is I add more misery to myself. You see, at the end of the day, I don't want to be a part of something, I don't want to be a part of a life that was me, that I did it. At the end of the day, I want my life to be something that I couldn't explain any other way but to just say, "God did it." What I love about the Village Church, you talk to any one here in leadership and ask them how it happened, how it grew, what God is doing, how He did that and most of the time, you'd think there was some little booklet, some little pamphlet from another church that the leadership read. And I love the fact that you've heard Matt, you've heard anyone say, "Look, we didn't have any kind of booklet that we went by, it was God." I love the fact that the characteristic about this church is that "God did it." Man, I want my life to be like that. In Isaiah 30, God says, "Woe to My people who make plans but not of Me, who devise plans but not of My Spirit." Man, I don't want my life to be something that I did. At the end of the day, I want to say, "I was part of God's plan." Don't you? And so he tries to help God with the plan, and look at what God says in verse four and five. "And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: 'This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.' And he brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'" I love that. "Not only are you going to have a descendant, but come out here, Abraham. Look at all these stars, look at all this sand. That's going to be your descendants. I am going to do something amazing through you. You just trust Me."

So what do you do? How do you live in that gap? I think we can catch some things from this text. Let's just walk through it. When you're in the gap and you haven't seen the promises happen yet kicking in your life, the first thing to do is recognize what the true reward really is, recognize what the true reward of the gospel is. Go to verse 1. "After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.'" What God says first and foremost, He knows he's grumbling, "How come the child hasn't come yet? The promise hasn't come," the first He says to him is, "Don't forget, Abram, I'm your reward. You already have the great promise, you've got Me." Another translation says, "I am your shield, your reward will increase greatly." What He's driving at there is, "I'm the source of your reward. Look to Me." And let me say this. If that doesn't blow us away, then I don't think we truly understand the gospel or we truly understand what our condition was before Jesus reconciled us to God. You see, the

amazing thing about Jesus Christ is not the stuff He gives me, the blessings; the amazing thing about Jesus Christ is that He offers me relationship with God. He offers me restored relationship. That's what's so amazing about the gospel, not His blessing. 2 Corinthians 5 says that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. The whole point of Jesus coming to this earth and dying on the cross is to restore relationship with them. And I say to you, if you're thinking, "Well of course. I mean, He's God. He wants to have a relationship with me," there's no "of course" about it. The first 15 chapters of Genesis are all about how man turned from God. When man turned from God, the relationship was broken. So what God was offering Abraham was huge here. In Genesis 16, when he has this incredible failure, he sleeps with his maid-servant Hagar, he has this incredible lack of faith step, he's 86 years old. In Genesis 17, he's 99 years old. Thirteen years. We don't know if God is silent for those thirteen years, but can you imagine thirteen years for Abraham to sit there and think, "Man, I messed up. I messed up my end of the covenant. I messed up. He's not going to come through... maybe." And then in Genesis 17, God comes to him again and He speaks. I want you to go to verse 7, and I want you to catch this. In verse 7, He says to Abraham, "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger..." What God says to Abraham is this, "Here's what you get, here's the covenant, Here's My part, here's My blessing for you. You get Me. I'm your God. You get me back. You maybe thought you lost Me, but I'm still your God. Also, I give you the land." But do you know what we do? We go, "Land?" and we put our eyes on the land and we start going after the land and we forget that the amazing thing that caused Abraham in Genesis 17 to fall on his face at the beginning of the chapter is that God came back to him. Restored relationship, that's what it is. I've heard Matt say here that a lot of times, idols are the thing that we clench with our right hand and that when we come to God and we want to talk to him, we're holding on to something, He doesn't want to talk to us until we deal with this. And so we clench to something with our right hand and that's an idol. A lot of the time, I found out what we as Christians do is we idolize not just what's in our right hand, but what's in God's right hand. We're just so mesmerized by it. We want the stuff in His right hand. And God is saying to you, you're living in the gap, you feel like He's not coming through? Get your eyes off of His right hand and put them on His face. Quit worshiping the things He gives you and worship Him because He's your reward. The land will never, ever fulfill you. Only a restored relationship, only that relationship will.

By the way, I remember preaching this in the Middle East with my friend, Jason. We stood up and there were a bunch of Middle Easterners and a bunch of Muslims were there. So I start preaching and say, "Look, religion will never save you, religion will never fulfill you, works will never set you free. Only a relationship with God can, and that only comes through Jesus Christ." And one guy, a Muslim guy had the audacity to raise his hand. And I'm like, "Wait, you're not from our culture I guess, because I speak and you listen. That's the way it works." And he raised his hand, and I'm like, "What happens next? I guess I call on him." And so I'm like, "Yes?" And he's like, "What about you? Is Jesus fulfilling you? Is He enough for you?" You're not supposed to ask me that, right? I'm supposed to just preach it. This isn't a test. And man, I was just blown away. I had to come face to face with the reality that if I was honest, and I was with him actually, that He was not fulfilling me. Now listen, you're saying "What?" Jesus Christ was not fulfilling me and that has nothing to do with how all-fulfilling He is, it has everything to do with the condition of my heart at time. I was running after the land in my heart and I was going after the idols and I was unfulfilled. So Jesus says, "Quit looking at the promise. Look at Me. I'm the reward. Worship me."

How many of you have heard my story before? Well, my dad disowned me for being a Christian. Now I have restored relationship with him, but at the beginning we didn't have a relationship. What was really hard for me is, I was at the University of Texas, I'd come to Houston to visit my family, I'd go to my parents' house, my dad would walk out of the room and go into his bedroom and wouldn't talk to me. So I'd talk with my step-mom and the rest of my family and I'd leave. That was the hardest time. It lasted for about a year. Can I tell you something? That whole time, I didn't long for my dad's money, I didn't long for his possessions, for his blessings, for his stuff, but man, I longed for his relationship.

Growing up, I used to watch classics with my dad. We used to watch the Humphrey Bogart stuff, that was sort of our thing to do. And so one day I came home and he's not talking to me, and I got sick. Well hello, he's a doctor, so he can't avoid that one. So my step-mom calls him and says, "Hey, I know you're not speaking to your son, but he's sick and you need to bring medicine home." So my dad comes home and he's got two bags in his hands. One bag was the bag of medicine, he put it on the cabinet. The other bag said "Blockbuster" on it. Can I tell you something? He set that down and I pulled the movie out as he walked out and it was a Tyrone Powers movie. You probably don't know who that is. He's an actor from way back when, the 40's or 50's. It was a classic. And let me say something. With that one gesture, what my dad said to me was, "Alright, you get relationship back." And my heart jumped within me. Restored relationship. What do you think it was about the cross that was so excruciating for Jesus? It wasn't just the physical pain of it, he said, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" It was because Jesus had taken our sin on his shoulder that God turned His back to the sin and He had broken the relationship with the Father. That's what was so excruciating about the cross.

I mean, we even mess up heaven sometimes. You know what we do about heaven? "Oh man, that's where the streets of gold are going to be. That's where the mansions are going to be. Remember when He said 'In my Father's house there are many mansions?' Man..." And we start making heaven about stuff. That's not what's amazing about heaven, folks. In John, Jesus says, "I'm about to go, and where I go, you can't follow Me." And in John 14, He says, "I'm going to go prepare the way for you." And we think preparing the way means, "Oh, isn't that neat? He's a carpenter. So He says there's going to be mansions. He's going to go build me some houses. That's what He's going to be doing in heaven." That's not what He means by preparing the way. Do you know what He means? "I'm going to go die on the cross and rise again." That's the preparation. "I'm going to prepare a way for you." And He says, "In my Father's house there are many mansions, and I'm going to prepare a place for you. I'm going to come back and bring you to Me so that where I am, there you will be." The disciples are blown away. What He's saying is, "I'm about to leave you, but don't be disheartened, because I'm going to come back and you're going to be with Me for eternity." That's what's amazing about heaven. It's that we get to be with Him forever. And so, if you are in the gap right now and you're wondering, "God, where are You? You're not coming through," I say to you, quit worshiping the plan, the blessings, the right hand; worship the One that has the blessings.

Let's keep going. Let's go to Genesis 15:6. "And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." That's a huge verse. That's the gospel. If you didn't know, that's the gospel. The Bible is clear that those who are of Abraham, that means they are in the lineage, the family of God or those who are of faith, you were saved by faith, not by works but by believing. Once you recognize that the reward is Him and that God has restored that relationship in the Old Covenant and the New Covenant in Jesus with you and you take a step of faith and believe in it, you are counted righteous. Not because of you but because of your faith. The Bible says it in Hebrews 11:6, without faith, it's impossible to please God. Before and after the cross, the way people are saved is by faith, through faith. We're saved by grace through faith. Not of ourselves, it's a gift from God. Not of works, lest any man should boast. If you're here today and you haven't taken that step of faith, let me say something to you. You will never be fulfilled in life. You can go after all the blessings, all the American dream, all the land, but you were not made for that. You were made for a relationship. And unless you have your relationship restored with God, you will never, ever be fulfilled.

Let's move on because what happens next is very important. Look at verse 9. "So He said to him, 'Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.' Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two." Now the reason why I'm going to stay on that for a second is this. Once you understand how great the reward is and you believe in your heart in it, the next step is your willingness to sacrifice anything for it. Once you understand and you receive your reward, you're willing to let go of anything to attain it. And so, He calls him to a sacrifice. This speaks loudly to me. He says, "Afshin, if you understand how great the reward is that I'm offering to you, you will give everything up for Me." You see, the value of the reward or better yet, the ability of my eyes to understand the

reward is directly tied to how much I'm able to sacrifice. I preach my testimony at times, and people will come up to me afterwards and I know they're trying to say, "Wow, what a tough thing you went through," and let me tell you, I didn't do it in my own strength. But they say to me, "Man, I couldn't give up my dad. I couldn't do that." And again, I understand that they're trying to say what a tough thing it was, but I want to say to them, "You couldn't? If you can't give up your dad for Jesus, then you don't understand what you're getting." Because when you understand what a truly amazing reward Jesus Christ is and the relationship that He offers you with God, you'd be willing to let go of anything for it. In Matthew 13:44, Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." Do you see it? When you understand, "This is it, this is the reward, this is what I cherish more than anything else in life," then this is a no-brainer for you if you sell everything to buy that. That's why a young man falls in love with a girl and decides, "Man, this is the one I want to spend the rest of my life with," and sells all his stuff to buy a diamond, the treasure, put it on her hand and say, "I want to spend the rest of my life with you." You sacrifice whatever it takes for who you want to be with. By the way, if you're dating and that person isn't sacrificing anytime to be with you, anything to be with you, it might be a bad sign. That's why at a wedding, we stand here and and look at that girl and say that phrase, "Forsaking all others." When you're at the wedding, what's so awesome is you're not only saying "I do" to a girl, but with that "I do," you're saying "I don't" to every other girl in the world. You're saying, "Man, I'm all in. I've burned the ships. I've sold everything I have. I want to be with you." And listen, if you're not able to do that with Jesus, then you don't understand the reward that you're getting. You ought to be willing to let go of anything to follow Him. The truth of the matter is this. You either sacrifice God for the land and you miss God or you sacrifice the land for God and you end up getting both. It's a no-brainer. If you sacrifice God for the land and you miss God and the land cheapens, it never fulfills you. If you sacrifice the land for God, you get God most importantly. Yeah, you might get the land, but who cares, you've got God.

Go to Genesis 15:11. "And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away." Now this is an interesting verse that we see here. Why would this verse be here? Man, it speaks loudly to me. Abram makes this incredible sacrifice, then when the vultures or birds of prey come, he has to drive them away. What I want you to understand is this. You make a sacrifice, and the next step is you've got to persevere, you've got to preserve the sacrifice, you've got to maintain it, you've got to keep it. In other words, it's not a "once and done" sacrifice. We think that we come to Christ and we make this sacrifice and then that's it. You've got to keep sacrificing. You're entering into a lifetime of sacrifice. Again, it's like a marriage. You come here and say "I do," well great. That's just the beginning though. Then you've got to fight for your marriage. You've got to fight off the vultures, you've got to keep sacrificing. It's not just "once and done." No one would ever tell you that. No marriage counselor will ever tell you, "Oh, you've just got to make one commitment and you're done..." No, it's once and everyday sacrifice. The same thing with Jesus. You make a sacrifice and as Paul says, "I die daily." Jesus says, "Take up your cross daily." The real thing is this. That one sacrifice really prepares you for the next. Abraham is making this sacrifice, he has no idea about what God's about to call him to sacrifice...his own son. One sacrifice prepares you for the next. But what I want to do is this. I don't know that you've ever been there, but I want to tell God this. I want to say to God, "God, haven't I sacrificed enough?" I've said that. I want to be very transparent. And I hate to say this, but I'll say, "God, I gave up my dad. Isn't that enough?" I'm just being transparent. I've had that thought before. It's a horrible thought. Because as soon as I say the word, "Isn't that enough?," the response is, "What's enough for Jesus? I gave My life for you so that you could know Me. What's enough?" And so, you've got to maintain it.

And let me say this real quick; this is huge. God is pleased by my persistence. When I don't see the promises fulfilled, when I'm going through trials in my life, when I persevere and I maintain the sacrifice and I drive off the vultures, God is pleased by my persistence. This is a biblical concept. God wants to see that in our lives, persistence. There's two reasons. The first one is that it shows God our faith, it proves our faith. In Luke 18, Jesus tells the story of a widow who went to a judge to ask for justice. The judge didn't fear God, but even he relented and gave her justice

because he thought her continual asking would make him weary. Now He's not saying that God is going to be like, "Alright fine, I'll give it to you." But He's saying, "How much more will God, who wants to bless you, bless you when we persevere, when we persist?" The woman who comes to Jesus and says, "Help me." And Jesus says, "I'm not going to give the children's bread to dogs because I've got to first come for the Jews." And she says, "Yeah, but even the dogs wait at the master's table for the crumbs that would fall." And He says, "Woman, great is your faith." The blind beggar who persists, he cries out to Jesus and the people tell him to shut up. And then he cries out louder. He's like, "Jesus of Nazareth, have mercy on me." And Jesus turns and He calls him to Himself and says, "Great is your faith." It proves your faith. Listen to Hebrews 11:6. "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him." So the first reason is that God wants to see diligence and persistence in my life.

The second reason we don't see the promises and we don't see the blessings yet is this. A lot of times, it's because God is doing something bigger than you can see. You can't see it, but He's saying, "Trust Me. My timing is perfect." We're going to jump real quick to verse 16 of Genesis 15 when He's talking about what's going to happen with the people, that they're going to wander. And then verse 16 says this, "In the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." Now, I don't have time to discuss all of that, but the bottom line is God is saying, "I'm doing a bigger picture thing that you are going to fit into. So just trust Me." So listen folks, a lot of times I give up on God, I turn my back on God, and I'm afraid that when we bail on God, we miss out on what He wants to do through that time. I'm a sports fanatic if you don't know that about me. One of the best sports moments ever is the 1988 World Series. Anyone know what I'm talking about? The '88 World Series was the Dodgers against the A's. The A's are like the 'roid Brothers. Like Mark McGwire, Jose Canseco, they're all like 'roided up. They were unstoppable. They were supposed to sweep the Dodgers 4-0. It was supposed to be the biggest mismatch. The Dodgers make it to the World Series in the NLCS and Kirk Gibson, their best player, gets injured. And so in game 1 of the World Series, Kirk Gibson's not playing. So the score is 2-1 A's, the bottom of the 9th, Dennis Eckersley, the closer, comes out of the bullpen. When Eckersley came into the game, the game was over. People in Dodger Stadium started filing out, not everyone but a bunch of them did. In game 1 of the World Series, they were like "Eckersley's there. Forget it." Eckersley comes in, 2 outs, the Dodgers finally get a guy on first base. A man on first, 2-1, bottom of the 9th and Tommy LaSorda, the manager of the Dodgers throws Kirk Gibson out there, totally limping. He figures desperate times call for desperate measures. Gibson can't even run out a single. It's either a home run or an out. So he limps out to the plate, and you probably know what happens, one of the greatest moments in World Series history. He hits a home run over the right field wall. As he's rounding first, "Dodgers win," he starts pumping his fist, everyone's seen that clip...a lot of people have. But listen, if you go back and see that clip again, a lot of people haven't seen this, as the ball goes over the right field wall, in the distance, there's a string of red lights and it just goes down like a domino effect. Do you know what that was? Those were the cars leaving the parking lot listening to the call of the shot on the radio and slamming on their brakes. Every time I watch that clip, I look for that and I just think to myself, "Man, if I was in that car listening to that shot, I would be like, 'I hate my life. I just bailed out on the greatest moment in World Series history.'" So listen, I don't want to be in the parking lot, giving up on God when He's about to do something through my perseverance.

I've got to share one more story because this just happened in my life since the last time I talked to you. Something huge happened in my life. No, I'm not married, but something else huge happened. My older brother is not a Christian. He lives in Los Angeles and has an autistic child. It's really hard on his life. He's kind of struggling with his job. And so three years ago, I went through a hard time in my life where I got spun out in a series of panic attacks. Like three nights in a row, I woke up with cold sweat and my heart racing. It was like the darkest time in my life. I've always said, "God, maybe You were doing something through that," but I never even wanted to talk about that time. Five months ago, my brother calls me and he's like, "Man, I had a panic attack last night. And I remember you had one and got through it. Can you talk to me about it?" And I'm like, "Yeah," but I had a bunch of college students with me. So I go, "Can I call you back?"

Because I'm kind of tied down right now." He's like, "Sure, just call me when you're done." And so, I call my sister who's a Christian first to tell her to pray me, and right before she gets off the phone, she's like, "Hang on, be sure to tell him about Jesus." I'm like, "Well, thank you for that. Duh." But it kind of showed you my lack of faith, because do you know what I was thinking? I was thinking, "Aw, I always tell him about Jesus. What's this one time going to do?" So I get to this church where I was supposed to have this meeting, I got on my face first before I called my brother and said, "Lord, forgive me. What if this is his time? What would You have me say?" And man, Jesus gave me very clearly four verses: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." The one where He goes out onto the deck of this boat and calms the storm. "Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." So I call my brother and I go, "Bro, what happened?" And he tells me about his panic attack and I just say, "Man, until you get your heart right with God and you have a relationship with God, you will not have peace and rest in your soul." He's like, "Okay?" I'm like, "God told me to share four verses with you. Can I share them with you?" He says, "Sure," and I share those four verses and my brother crumbles. And he goes, "Bro, I need Jesus. What do I need to do?" Now, I'm an evangelist. The "what do I need to do?" is your dream question, but I was so shocked that my brother was saying this that for a second I was stuck. I was like, "I don't know. What does he do?" And I said, "Bro, Romans 10:13 says, 'All who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'" And I didn't even have to say, "Man, are you ready to pray that?" Right then my brother, over the phone, says, "Jesus, I call on You. Save me." And man, I led my brother to Christ six months ago. Isn't that awesome? Isn't that amazing? But let me tell you something. Not just the fact that I have another believer in my family, there's three of us now, but what's also awesome is God took the darkest time in my life and He redeemed it and He used it for good in His plan. So trust Him.

Let's keep going. Let's go through Genesis 15:12-16. "Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. Then He said to Abram: 'Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age.'" Right there, that was a huge, huge statement. Abram for the first time heard God say, "Abram, you won't even see the promise in your life." That's pretty big. Because look in the next verse He says, "In the fourth generation they shall return here." He's saying, "You're going to come back here, you're going to die at a good old age and then they're going to come into the land. Listen, the reward is not whether or not we're even going to get to see the promise in our lifetime; the reward is the fact that we get to be a part of it at all. That's the reward. And some of us, we may never see what God is going to do, the incredible fulfillment of His promise in your life. That woman who gave me a Bible in the second grade, I've never talked to her. I don't even know where she is. She's never going to see what that one little act is probably going to do. Maybe later on. Who knows? You will never see it, but it doesn't matter. The fact that you get to be a part of it all is what matters.

Go to verse 17. "And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces." When a covenant was made, two kings would come to make a covenant, they would cut the sacrifice in two, put the pieces on either side, and the two of them would walk in between as if to say, "If I don't hold my end of the covenant, let me be torn in two." And a smoking oven and burning torch, that's God. God led the people in the pillar of fire, He's seen as being in the fire. So God literally is putting His seal on His word. "I will come through with My promise, Abraham." And what's so cool is it's a picture of the cross. Do you know why? Because we don't hold our end of the covenant. That's why Jesus comes and literally, if you will, He's torn in two on the cross to uphold our part of the covenant. I love the gospels and the Old Testament. But here's the last thought. "On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: 'To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates.'" And then He lists who all is going to be living there, but

the bottom line is this. His vision becomes more focused. Now he sees the boundary. Now God says, "I'm going to give you even more clarity of what I'm going to do." He believed God, he made a sacrifice, he persisted and then God brought him clarity, a focus of his vision. The other thing I love about it is this, that He says, "To your descendants I will give this land." Meaning this, "I've already done it. You get to now come and be a part of this plan." Abram started in this chapter trying to do his own plan, but then he believed God and he persisted and God said, "Guess what. You're going to be a part of My plan." And can I say something to you? That is the reward. The fact that I get to know God and be a part of His gospel going out, that is my reward, that's reward enough. And just as I said that if we understand how amazing the reward of a relationship is, we would sacrifice anything for it, I would also say that if we understand how amazing being part of the gospel going out is, we would sacrifice anything to be a part of that.

Let's go to 1 Corinthians 9. I love this. This is Paul talking about his rights and whether he should be served or given money for ministering, and this is the Corinthians who helped start the church obviously. And so in the middle of this, in verse 15, he says, "But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me; for it would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void. For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship." What he's saying is this. "If I preach the gospel willingly, meaning it's of my will, it's my decision to do it, then I ought to get rewarded for it. But if it's been entrusted to me by God, it's a stewardship, I have to do it." So where's the reward? Look at verse 18. "What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel." What he's saying is, "The reward is I get to be a part of the gospel going out. I don't even want the money or the blessing. The fact that I get to be a part of it is reward enough." I talk to young people all the time. They'll come up to me and it blows me away. They'll ask me questions like, "What about drinking? Can I drink? I mean, if I'm over 21, what's the big deal? Can I drink in public? What can or can't I do? With my girlfriend, how far is too far?" We all want to find the verse and see what we can get away with or what we can't do, what our rights are. I don't even understand why we go there. Because when you come to Christ and you understand the reward, you say, "Man, my rights go out the window. I just want to be a part of this." Here's what I mean in verse 19. "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews;. . .to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you." He's saying, "My rights go out the window. I'll be a slave or whatever so I can be a part of that." Let me say this. One of the great benefits of my salvation is that I can eat pork now. I'm serious. I'm not making that up. The first time I put a strip of bacon in my mouth, I was like, "Good Lord, what have I been missing out on?" I mean, I think that's apologetic enough. Just bring the sizzling bacon to a Muslim and say, "You want Jesus? Come on." I'm joking but listen. When I go eat breakfast with my dad, I don't order bacon. I have the right. The Bible says it's not unclean, I can do it. But I don't care about my rights. I want my dad to come to Christ. We don't understand the reward when we say, "God, why do I have to go and be a missionary?" You look to your left and right and say, "That person's making \$200,000 a year, they have the wife, the kids and I don't have a wife or kids. Why me? Why do I have to go do that." We don't understand the reward. You get to be a part of the gospel going out. It's a gospel centered life. I get to know Him, and I get to make Him known and be a part of that and I'll sacrifice anything to be a part of that.

I want you to bow your heads with me and close your eyes. Let's pray, just take a moment real quickly and close in prayer. If you're here tonight and you've spent the majority of your lifetime running after the land and have been unfulfilled by it, Christ offers you life. The Bible says in Jesus was life, the life was the light of men. You do not know life, you do not know fulfillment until you know the One you were made for. And just like my brother, he called on the name of Jesus. If you're here and you're saying, "Man, I don't know Him. I'm unfulfilled. I need Jesus," why not just call out on Him now? Right where you're seated, just say, "Jesus save me. Save me from this life apart from You." If you do know Him, are you

running after the land today? Are you running after His right hand? Maybe right now you confess and say, "God, forgive me. I need to make You my reward, because You truly are my reward." Put your eyes on Him now and say, "God, I want to make my relationship with You my priority." If you're in the place right now, you're in the gap, and you just need to pray for strength to persist, say, "God, I don't know where You are, but I believe You're doing a great work through me that I may not even see. Give me strength to persevere." "Father, we love You. Thank You Jesus that You paid the ultimate price on the cross to give us restored relationship. Forgive us when we hold back. God, allow us to give all of us to You. We love you. In Christ's name we pray. Amen."

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