



Introduction:

Advice. We all receive it. We all give it. We just can't help ourselves. Sometimes the advice is better than others and sometimes the advice is just dead wrong. G.K. Chesterton supposedly said, "I owe my success to having listened respectfully to the very best advice, and then going away and doing the exact opposite." In fact, there is one piece of advice that all of us have heard, but we need to go away and do the exact opposite. It is advice we've heard all our lives. It is advice we've all given. But it is dead wrong. At least it is dead wrong when applied to serving God and our journey to heaven. Are you ready for it? The most deadly advice you can receive when it comes to serving the Lord is "You've got to believe in yourself." I hate to kick our sacred cow, but PMA, self-confidence, and messages of "you can do it, just believe in yourself" are deadly to you. In fact, if you want to be successful in serving the Lord, if you want to be with God eternally, you need to go away from that advice and do the exact opposite. I know this sounds odd but it is true. Let me show you why.

Discussion:

I. Abraham's success.

- A. In **Romans 4:18-22**, Paul tells us about Abraham's success in God's kingdom. It is an amazing story, actually. In **Genesis 15:5**, God brought Abraham (at that time still called Abram) outside and told him to look at the night sky. The stars spread across the heavens. God said, "So shall your offspring be" (**Genesis 15:5**, ESV). Here is what is amazing. At that point, Abraham was somewhere between 75 and 86 years old (probably closer to the 86 mark). But the real kicker is he didn't have any children. How on earth was he going to become the father of many nations? But the text says, "And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness." And, of course, we know the end of the story. Everything God promised Abraham came true. He did become the father of many nations. His descendants did possess the Promised Land. His offspring is a blessing to all nations. Abraham became the father of many nations. Arabs and Jews alike see him as physical ancestor. Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike view him as a spiritual father.
- B. In **Romans 4:18-22**, Paul explained why Abraham was successful.
 1. It wasn't because of his own ability. In fact, according to **Romans 4:19**, his own ability was against him. His body was as good as dead. When the first child in this long line of descendants was finally born, he was almost a hundred. Not only was his body dead, his wife's body was barren. **Genesis 18:11** explains that her barrenness was more than just not getting pregnant. "The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah" (ESV). That is, she had already gone through menopause. She had no more ova with which to conceive. Neither Abraham, nor Sarah had the ability to bring about this success.
 2. If you remember the story, you know that they did try with their human strength. Since Sarah hadn't become pregnant, they decided to help God along in **Genesis 16**. Sarah gave Abraham her handmaiden, Hagar; and Hagar conceived and bore Ishmael. By the way, I don't think this was a lack of faith on their part. At this point, God had not clarified that the child would come through Sarah; He just said it was going to be Abraham's direct descendant. This could still fit. But what is happening here? Abraham is still thinking in terms of God being limited by human ability. God clears up very quickly that Ishmael is not the fulfillment of the promise. This is about God's ability, not man's.
 3. Finally, in **Genesis 18**, the Lord visited a 99-year-old Abraham and renewed this offspring promise. He even put a time limit on it. "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son" (**Genesis 18:10**, ESV). Sarah laughed to herself, but the LORD said, "Why did Sarah laugh...Is anything too hard for the LORD?" And that is the point—nothing is too hard for the Lord.
 4. If it wasn't the ability of Abraham and Sarah that caused their success, what was it? According to **Romans 4:20-21**, Paul explains, "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (ESV). Do you see it? What made Abraham successful? Not his ability to do what God commanded, but God's ability to do what He promised. Why was Abraham successful? Not because he believed in himself, not because he believed in Sarah. Abraham was successful because he believed in God. His dead body didn't cause him to waver because he believed in God's ability to bring life to the dead.

II. Our success.

- A. What does this have to do with us? Jump ahead to **Romans 7:24**. Have you ever felt that? “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Look at how Paul describes his life in his own ability in **Romans 7:14-23**. What is Paul saying? Paul is saying, “I can’t do it. Sin has taken over. My body is dead.” If it were anybody but Paul, do you know what most of us would say to this guy? “You’re just not trying hard enough. You can do it. You just need to believe in yourself and try harder.” But this is an inspired apostle. PMA, self-esteem, self-confidence isn’t going to work. He is defeated and dead.
- B. But he has an answer. In **Romans 7:25**, Paul proclaims, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (ESV). In **Romans 8:1-2**, Paul says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (ESV). Paul’s point is that the law in our members that keeps our body dead is broken by the law of the Spirit of life. The Spirit introduces a new law into our lives that sets us free from that law of death.
- C. No doubt there is a good deal we need to examine throughout **Romans 8**. But for this lesson, I just want us to see that, like Abraham, we can have confidence in God’s ability to do what He has promised. We can have confidence in God’s ability to raise the dead, bringing us to life. Do not allow the deadness of your body to get in the way. In **Romans 8:10-11**, Paul says, “But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you” (ESV). Then as Paul wraps up this section of his letter he drives this home saying:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (**Romans 8:28-39**, ESV).

What is Paul doing in this passage? He is demonstrating how much faith we can have in God’s intention and ability. We know God works everything together for the good of those who love Him. He did it with Abraham, He’ll do it with us. If He was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus to reconcile us, can we doubt that He will make lesser sacrifices to make sure we are with Him forever? If God is the one justifying us, who can condemn us? We are conquerors. Why? Because of our ability? No because of God’s ability.

- D. We do not need to believe in our ability to keep God’s commands. We need to believe in God’s ability to keep His promise. And that leads us to the big question. Do you believe it? Do you believe in God? Do you believe in God’s ability to do what He has promised? What is God’s promise? Eternal life (**Romans 6:23**). Do you believe in God’s ability to bring life to your dead body?

III. What does that look like?

- A. *It looks like submitting to God.* When God called Abraham out of Haran, he left (**Genesis 12:4**). He swore by God and kept his oaths (**Genesis 14:22-24**). When God called Abraham to circumcise himself, his son Ishmael, and his servants, he did it (**Genesis 17:22-27**). And ultimately, when God called Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his only son through Sarah, he did it, or at least got right up to doing it before God stopped him (**Genesis 22**). No wonder Paul described Abraham as the father of those “who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had” (**Romans 4:12**). Believing in God’s ability to keep His promise and not in our ability to obey God’s commands doesn’t mean ignoring God’s commands, it actually means submitting to them because we know God’s directions and commands will actually work.
- B. *It looks like submitting to God even when we can’t see how His promise is going to happen.* Abraham couldn’t understand how God’s promise was going to come true. In **Genesis 15:3**, Abraham questioned how it would happen. He didn’t have a son at all. In **Genesis 17:17-18**, Abraham questioned how it could happen with

Sarah since she was unable to get pregnant, why not just use the son he already had, Ishmael. But all the way along, God kept assuring Abraham it would happen and it would happen God's way, not Abraham's. What did Abraham do? He kept trusting God, following God, obeying God.

- C. *It looks like submitting to God even after we sinned.* While I know we are all striving to get it all right, all the time, we sin sometimes. Sometimes we sin big. While we live by faith, sometimes our faith slips. Consider Abraham in **Genesis 20**. Between God's promise that Abraham would have a child and the actual fulfillment of the promise, Abraham had a struggle in faith. Abraham was afraid that Abimelech would kill him over Sarah (**Genesis 20:11**). So he hid that she was his wife and just said she was his sister. This was the second time he committed this sin (cf. **Genesis 12:10-20**). Make no mistake, this is a faith struggle. How can God fulfill his promise to give Abraham a child if he is dead? Yet, despite this struggle, Paul is able to say of Abraham that "no distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God" (**Romans 4:20**). If Abraham had been trusting in his own ability, this slip would have caused him to turn away from God. Instead, it ended up being a reason to believe God even more. And that is exactly what we need to see. We aren't saying people are allowed to disobey God. We don't want to disobey God. But we are saying that when we've sinned, we don't have to give up because we aren't trusting in our ability to keep God's commands, but in God's ability to keep His promise. When I sin, I don't have to think it is all over. I can pick myself up, dust myself off, pick up the cross again, hold on to God's hand, and keep surrendering to Him. Remember grace is not the permission to return to sin when we've turned to God, it is the permission to return to God when we've sinned. And when it is all said and done, He'll say about me that I didn't waver in distrust because of the deadness of my body, but hung on to Him in faith because of His ability to keep His promise. Wow!!!

Conclusion:

Do you believe in God? Do you believe God? Do you believe in God's promise of life? Do you believe in God's ability to bring about His promise? Or are you despairing over your lack of ability? I don't know what has happened in your life this week. You may have lied to Abimelech and struggled with your faith. Bring it back to God. Once again you've demonstrated that if it depended on your ability to keep God's commands, you'd be in trouble. But it doesn't depend on that. It depends on God's ability to keep His promise. Come back to Him. Or maybe you've never even put your faith in God's promise of life. If that is the case, remember what Paul said in **Romans 6:1-4**. Put your faith in God's ability to keep His promise. Accept His promise. Surrender to His promise. Be baptized into Christ and let God bring you to the newness of life, then keep surrendering to Him no matter what He asks. His will gets you there. He will bring you to life.