Abraham and Abimelech

Trust is getting in the wheelbarrow. If you are not familiar with that phrase it comes from a story about Charles Blondin, a French tight rope walker and acrobat who performed in the mid 1800’s. Blondin was famous for his feat of walking across Niagara Falls on a tight rope which he reportedly did on about 300 occasions. Suspended 190 feet above the falls, Blondin crossed the 2220 foot expanse employing a variety of props including frying an omelet, walking on stilts and pushing a wheelbarrow. There is an account of one of his crossings that may be a myth but it makes a great illustration. It is said that after crossing the falls pushing a wheelbarrow, Blondin asked the crowd watching him if they believed he could push the wheelbarrow across with a someone sitting in it. Everyone shouted yes, they believed he could. Blondin’s next question: Who will get in the wheelbarrow? was met with silence. The crowd had faith that he could push the wheelbarrow across the falls but no one was willing to trust their life to him. As we continue our study of Abraham in Genesis chapter 20, we see the gap between faith and trust in his life.

The chapter begins after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah which Abraham could see in the plain below his tent. He and his family moved again, perhaps not wanting to be reminded of the people who perished. They settled in the southern part of Canaan in Gerar which was ruled by Abimelech and Abraham falls back on an old trick. Just as he did with Pharaoh, Abraham pretends to be Sarah’s brother and Abimelech takes Sarah into his harem. If the story seems familiar, it plays out almost exactly as it did in Egypt (see chapter 12). God appears to Abimelech in a vision warning him not to go near Sarah and to return her to Abraham. Abimelech then confronts Abraham asking why he had brought such calamity on his house. Notice that in his response Abraham actually blames God for the ruse saying that it was necessary because God had caused him to wander from his home. Just as with Pharaoh, the irony is that Abraham, a man of faith, is righteously rebuked by a pagan. Abimelech rewards Abraham with sheep, cattle and slaves and pays Sarah compensation for damaging her reputation. He also offers them their choice of land under his rule. His motive was no so much to enrich Abraham as it was an attempt to cool God’s anger as He had closed the wombs of all the women in Abimelech’s household. Once again Abraham reaped a financial benefit from sinful behavior.

The fact that Abraham was a man of great faith is undisputed. Chapter 11 of Hebrews is considered the hall of fame of the faithful and Abraham’s acts of faith are well documented there starting with his response to God’s call to leave his homeland. Abraham was also noted for his righteousness which was credited to him because of his faith (Gen. 15:6, Rom. 4:3). While Abraham’s faith was strong, his trust in God was lacking and that was revealed on multiple occasions. When God called Abraham to leave his home in Ur and go to Canaan, he tarried in Haran. When he finally reached Canaan, famine struck the land and Abraham left for Egypt rather than trusting that God would supply his needs. In Egypt and later in Gerar, Abraham did not trust God for his personal protection instead relying on subterfuge. When God promised Abraham a son, he did not trust that God would deliver, choosing instead to obtain a son through Hagar rather than wait for God.

It seems to me that trust is something that does not come naturally to us, particularly when our lives hang in the balance. I have a friend who was in the Marine Corp and he made numerous parachute jumps. He said that he eventually learned to trust his equipment but that first jump was terrifying. I found the following explanation of the difference between faith and trust written by Henry Morris, IV: “Faith in God is the confident belief that He is the sovereign Creator of all things and that He can and will do what He claims. Trust, on the other hand, is a verb. It is something you do or act upon. Faith always comes first, but trust is never guaranteed. It is a willful choice, a deliberate action, and can only grow out of your faith.” I am reminded of the hymn Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus which contains the following lines:

Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him!
How I've proved Him o'er and o'er
Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus!
Oh, for grace to trust Him more!

Trust is reinforced by past events where trust was vindicated as it will always be when we trust Jesus. The beauty in the hymn is the plea to trust Him more. What wheelbarrow have you been afraid to climb into?