

Covenant: Promises Made, Part 4 - Abraham

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- [0 : 0 0] Now we recognize that there are challenges in our lives that are universal. That being a Christian doesn't spare us from struggles with health, employment issues, issues to do with relationships or loss.
- There are things that we all experience as people. But there is a unique Christian struggle that I want us to think about this evening. And it's this.
- It's looking at our circumstances and wrestling with the reality that God is sovereign, that he is in control, and trying sometimes to marry that up with our understanding of God's goodness.
- Perhaps we find ourselves wrestling in that spot. I know God is good, and I know he's in control, but my life feels like a mess.
- How long, O Lord, is one of the cries that we hear time and again in the Psalms. And so I want us to look at this part of Abraham's story as that of a man of faith living in the gap between the great promises that God had given to him and the reality that he is experiencing at this time.
- [1 : 2 8] And I want us to appreciate that here we find not a skeptic wrestling, but a man of faith wrestling and seeking assurance of the promises of God.
- One hope I have for tonight is that we'll be able to see that asking questions of God, singing or voicing lament to God, protesting even about our circumstances to God, in the Christian life, reveal faith, not unbelief.
- Because we understand that God has made covenant promises, and so there will be times when we find ourselves asking, well, why is it like this and not like that?
- And one of the things that we understand from the Bible is that it's good to be honest with God, to take our frustration and our tears to God, to speak to him about our confusion.
- Abraham, the father of faith, shows that to us. He had received these great promises from God. He knew God to be loving and faithful.
- [2 : 4 2] God had promised to be his rock and his shield. But still there's the question, where's my child and where's the land? So lamenting, questioning reveals faith, not unbelief.
- But our main aim this evening is to see how, within this covenant, God connects his word of promise with signs. Word and signs going together in order to give us assurance of faith.
- It was a pattern that was true for Abraham then, and it's a pattern that remains true for God's people today. So let's look very briefly, first of all, at Genesis 12, to think about the story of God's grace in Abraham's life, and then to see his response to that.
- So the Lord, in verse 1, called Abraham. The last time we were thinking about the covenants, we were thinking about the Lord calling Noah. And again, here's another example of a pagan, unbelieving man being chosen and saved by the grace of God.
- It's really important for us to remember that reality. That's true of every story of a person coming to faith in the Lord Jesus. It begins with God's grace.

[4 : 03] I've been reading the Reformed documents known as the Canons of Dort, written in 1618, 1619. I want to read just one short paragraph that helps us think about this.

It says in there, the good pleasure of God is the sole cause of this gracious election. He was pleased out of the common mass of sinners to adopt some as a special people to himself.

That's the story of salvation. It's God's grace. It's God's good pleasure to save some, not because we're better, but because of his grace.

And having called him, we see then that Abraham receives three great promises from God. Go to the land I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. And ultimately, all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

[5 : 10] So he's promised a seed, a family, a great nation. He's promised the lands that we know of as the promised lands, Canaan. And he's promised that all peoples on earth will be blessed.

There'll be blessing to the nations through Abraham and his family line. So Abraham has received grace and he's received wonderful promises.

And Abraham, we see in verse four, shows faith. There is obedience. God says, go. And Abraham left as the Lord had told him.

Now, at this point, John Piper talks about Abraham's call being a mustard seed sized action of God.

When you think about how God could have worked, it is surprising in a sense that God chooses this elderly couple to be the vehicle for God's plan of salvation to continue.

[6 : 13] Not calling a nation immediately to himself, calling this elderly couple. Small, obscure beginnings. But as we look through the storyline of the Bible, it's used to bring that blessing to the nations.

Ultimately bringing the blessing of the Lord Jesus himself. A mustard seed sized action though. Boys and girls, I wonder, have you ever planted seeds?

Maybe had a wee garden box in your kitchen. If you're anything like me, I'm always a little bit doubtful that those tiny seeds will become anything at all.

Perhaps because I'm not very good at gardening. But it seems like something so small, how could that become a flower or a plant or a tree or something that could even give us food? Now, so this is a mustard seed sized action of God.

Seems small, but in God's hands proves huge. God often works this way for his own glory. I like the example in history of the conversion of Spurgeon.

[7 : 24] Charles Spurgeon, the great preacher in London. Well, in a winter snowstorm, way back in 1850, Spurgeon, the teenager, decided to go to a different church, to his usual church.

And the regular preacher wasn't able to get there because of the weather. So there was a substitute. A lay preacher was there. A man who didn't have any training. A man who largely spent the sermon repeating the words of Isaiah 45, 22.

Look to me and be saved, for I am God and there is no one else. Not a spectacular sermon, but used by God to save Spurgeon, who then went on to preach the gospel to tens of thousands of people who came to faith.

A mustard seed sized action used by God for his glory. So as we begin, I just want to encourage all of us to recognize that our small acts of faith in God's hands can be used to do great kingdom work.

When we pray for someone, when we seek to share the gospel, even when we don't do it perfectly, perhaps, in those acts of kindness that we seek to do in Jesus' name, God can use that to bless, to encourage, to bring to faith other people.

[8 : 49] Perhaps when we look back on our own stories, we recognize that we became a Christian because somebody invited us to a Bible study or to church. Somebody took the time to introduce us to Jesus.

Or perhaps a parent or a grandparent were praying for us. Small actions, big consequences in God's kingdom. So that's God's grace to Abraham, as seen in his call and in his promises.

Now turn with me to chapter 15. And I want us to recognize the tension and the struggle in Abraham's life. Abraham's struggle of faith.

So these huge promises have been made, but time is passing and there is still no sign of fulfillment. Ian Duggett, the Old Testament scholar, wrote a book on the life of Abraham called *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality*, which I think really helpfully captures a lot of Abraham's experience.

So in chapter 15 in verse 1, the word of the Lord comes to Abraham in a vision. Do not be afraid, Abraham. I am your shield, your very great reward, or your reward will be very great.

[10 : 01] How does Abraham respond to that wonderful message from God? Can we hear the sting in Abraham's voice?

What can you give me? Since I remain childless, you have given me no children.

In fact, he believes that he's going to have to adopt a slave to be his heir. So we need to remember, here is Abraham and he's struggling with the fact that he is childless, and that's a difficult situation for anybody to experience when they long to have children.

But even more intense for Abraham is the fact that all of God's promises are tied up with God sending a child as he promised. And so there is this struggle of faith going on with Abraham.

You said I would be a great nation, but I don't have a son. I have no child. So there is struggle, there is questioning, there is wrestling.

[11 : 15] And we see that too, not just with the promise of family, we see it too as God reminds him of his promise to give him the land. Verse 7, God also said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.

Great promise from God. But again, how does Abraham respond? Verse 8, O sovereign Lord, so he knows God's in charge, how can I know that I shall gain possession of it?

Here is a man who is struggling. His faith needs reassurance. Remember at this stage, he owns nothing. He's a small tribe, if you would call it that, him and his household.

There are nations all around. Ultimately in Abraham's life, all he will possess land-wise is a family burial plot. So again, there is this struggle of faith. How can I know?

You've made this promise. Time has passed. I still don't have a child. I still don't have the land. How can I know? I wonder, can you identify with Abraham's struggle of faith?

[12 : 29] You know, our faith rests on the grace of God. It rests on the promises of God. But sometimes God feels distant. Sometimes God seems silent.

Sometimes life just really hurts. And what do we do in that situation? I have found a theologian by the name of J. Todd Billings to be extremely helpful on this subject.

He is a theologian in the States. Same age as me, but diagnosed three years ago, I think, with terminal cancer. And he's written a book, a really helpful book called *Rejoicing with Lament*.

And he says that as the people of God, we need vocabulary for our pain, for our confusion, for our tears, for our protest.

That for him, he found that in the Psalms, those Psalms of lament. And Billings says that when we bring our sorrows and our fears to God as Christians, that is an act of trust.

[13 : 48] When we recognize God is sovereign, that we're wrestling with our circumstances. And we need in the church to have the language of lament.

Because we all struggle, lament, and there's no point pretending that life is all joy and happiness. Lament, Billings goes on to argue, is a sign of faith in a dark age.

We know the world is not the way it should be. We know that the world is fallen and broken, and we await its renewal. Yes, there is perfection coming, but in the moment, we're living in those last days, and they are dark days, as we thought about this morning.

So groaning and waiting is part of our experience as Christians. Actually, it's part of the gospel, because we have been saved, and we've got all these rich promises to come, but they haven't come yet.

And so here we find Abraham in that space where he's struggling. He's got questions. Maybe you find yourself in that position this evening. How does God respond to his questioning?

[15 : 10] Well, God confirms his promised grace. When life hasn't worked out as Abraham planned, when Abraham needs assurance, God comes again with his words of covenant promises, and he gives him signs to confirm those promises.

So look at verse 4. After Abraham said, you've given me no children, here is the word of promise from the sovereign Lord.

This man will not be your heir. Your servant will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir. So there's the great word of promise.

And then to assure him, he gives him a sign. He took him outside and said, look up at the heavens and count the stars. If indeed you can count them, so shall your offspring be to look up.

Without a telescope, they reckon, away from light pollution, we can see perhaps anywhere between 5,000 and 10,000 stars on a clear night.

[16 : 21] But imagine trying to count them. Here is God saying, look up, remember me, your creator. Look at all of those stars and recognize my promise to you is great.

Your family is going to be great. And you have that wonderful response of Abraham having received the word, having received the sign, Abraham believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.

He is counted in this right covenant relationship with God because of his faith. So he has questions about where is his family going to come from and God brings reassurance.

But there's the second combination of word and sign too. And this is truly staggering. There was the word of promise in verse 7 that Abraham would be given the land to take possession of it.

And Abraham is struggling. How can I know? And in verse 13 to 16, God gives him a timeline. So he's told there will be a time when his descendants will be slaves.

[17 : 34] But he promises that that nation that had them as slaves would be punished and they would come and they would take possession of the land. So he's saying, yes, you're going to have to wait, but you can wait with a certainty that there is a time coming for your family when that end will be over, when you will enjoy glorious freedom in the promised land.

And he doesn't just give him a word. He also gives him again a sign to assure him that his faith in God is well placed. This takes us to a covenant ceremony.

In verse 9, we find the beginning of the details. So here is a covenant ceremony that the Lord enters into with Abraham.

So the Lord said to Abraham, bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon. Abraham brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other.

The birds, however, he did not cut in half. So in the ancient Near East, there was this covenant-making ceremony where animals would be slaughtered, a path would be established between these cut-up animals and the parties entering into an agreement together would walk through declaring a self-curse on themselves if they were to break the terms of the agreement.

[19 : 06] I swear by my life if I break the terms of the agreement, let me become as these animals. But in the ancient Near East, it was always an unequal covenant.

There was always a superpower making a covenant with a nation that they had conquered. And so the terms always favored the strong. Essentially, it was a way for the strong to say, well, if you decide that you're going to enter into an alliance with this country over here, if you break faith, we're going to come and we're going to crush you.

So it very much favored the strong. But when we think about this covenant that God makes with Abraham, it's very, very different indeed.

Look at verse 17. Here is how the covenant comes to be. When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, promising him the land. This brazier, this smoking torch, is a vision of God himself.

[20 : 23] Here is God entering into a covenant agreement with a person. And notice, only the Lord passes through the pieces of the animals.

Here is the Lord God, the sovereign Lord, swearing to his servant. And even more amazing than that, we know whenever a covenant is entered into, there's always two parties.

So in a wedding covenant, there's a husband and a wife. In a contract of an employment, there is a boss and there is an employer. There is always two parties in a covenant.

But here, there's just the torch that passes through. What's that saying to us? It's saying to us that the Lord is also the servant.

The Lord is becoming the servant for the assurance of his servant Abraham. Abraham. This is a message of grace to Abraham and to the world.

[21 : 28] That the penalty for covenant breaking will be carried by the Lord who is also the servant. If we know the Old Testament, we perhaps think about the book of Isaiah, the servant of the Lord, the one who comes to bear the curse of the covenant for his people.

This is promising the coming of Jesus. Jesus, who is the Lord, who also becomes our suffering servant. Jesus, the one who secures our promised blessing as he takes the curse of the covenant.

What we deserve because of our law breaking, Jesus takes it and instead we receive all the rich blessings of life in covenant relationship with God.

Stories like this, passages like this are so important when we wrestle, when our life is in a mess and we wonder what God is doing. We need the word of God.

We need the promises of God to be our guide in those moments. Just like Abraham, we need to hear God's word of grace. How do we hear God's word of grace?

[22 : 45] Well, we hear it in the message of the cross where we see so clearly God's love, God's goodness, God's faithfulness to those he has established a covenant with.

blessing for us comes through the cursing of his one and only son. Just like Abraham, we need to hear the word of hope, to remember that God said, remember Abraham, from your seed will come blessing to the nations.

The same blessing that Abraham enjoyed is ours by faith in the Lord Jesus. Abraham was justified because of his faith, so too, by faith in Jesus we are justified, we are declared to be in right standing with God when our faith is in him.

Just as Abraham knew that God is for us, so by faith God is for us. He will always be God to us. He will use his power for us to work out his purposes for his people's good.

So we need to hear those words of grace and hope and we also need to receive for our assurance the sign of the covenant.

[24 : 06] What's the sign of the covenant for us to receive? What's the Lord's Supper as we celebrated last week? Remember Jesus at the Last Supper established the new covenant he said in his body and his blood.

Jesus' blood is poured out for the forgiveness of our sins to remove the curse for us, to bring us into a life of blessing, to invite us into the covenant.

And so we have word and sign as the Christian church to give us assurance. How can I trust God when my life is in a mess?

How can I trust God when I expected it to look like this, when I read in the Bible and I hear this and actually I'm struggling right now? Like Abraham, our hope comes in God's covenant promise to us, comes in that word of grace to us, and we can find assurance in the covenant sign of the Lord's Supper Edge in the Ryan.

He gives to us. He gives to us. He gives us. He gives us.

[25 : 27] He wears attention to us. He gives me towards us. He ■ over us. He gives other people that He gives to us and move.