

Wiser by Faith

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[0 : 0 0] When we look at these different sort of books, series material we have, we kind of put it together and then we get to the point where we plan and then we look at the reading and looked at this reading in the book and thinking, do I try and wriggle out and find an easier passage or do I take it as it's set?

I thought, let's go for it. Let's try and be bold here and let's try and work out what this passage, and I've got to tell you, I find it a really difficult one, what this has got to say to us about growing old, about growing wiser in faith. So here goes. Over these last few weeks, a message, and runs right through this series on growing older and wiser, we're talking about sort of two themes really. We're talking about growing older, something that happens to us every day of our lives, but also growing wiser. And whilst in the Bible we may have those places where those two themes go together, I mean, for example, in the life of the early church, the two are put together, the Greek word presbyteros, which is used to describe the leaders of the church, means elder. Whilst we find that in places, we need to be really, really clear that it's not an automatic link. In other words, that as we go through our lives, whilst every day we all age, we don't necessarily all grow in wisdom every day. So we need to ask ourselves the questions, what is it, what is it in scripture that actually makes growing older also growing wiser? And I think that in today's theme and in today's passage, we have something of a clue. That the answer lies in faith.

That if our ageing, if our growing older is rooted in faith, then something happens. If someone was to ask you, what do you think is one of the most significant and famous, well-known landmarks in Bristol, what would you say, what would most people likely to think of?

The suspension bridge, the Clifton suspension bridge. You know, I still, I don't know how many times I've seen that bridge, every time I look at it, tingles go down the back of my neck. I think it's stunning. I think it's one of those crowns in the jewel, jewels in the crown of our city.

But nobody really knows exactly how the first connection was made across the gorge. Whilst they have written records and things like that, they don't know exactly. According to folklore, there's one theory that a piece of rope or thread was carried by a kite from one side of the gorge to the other. Another theory even says that it was possibly a bow and arrow with a piece of rope attached to it. We don't really know. It's reckoned the most likely thing that happened was a piece of rope was dropped down one side, put on a boat, over the other, and then somebody scrambled up the other side. But at some point, somebody had to make that first connection. And it would have been a relatively weak connection, but it was a connection nevertheless. Once ropes had been put across, eventually six wire cables, and we do know this because it's been written down, six wire cables were pulled by that rope across from one side to the other. Eventually they put two other really strong cables with what's called a traveller, which is a metal frame with wheels. And that was used to take the links one by one across to form the chains before they then planked the whole thing out, and so was born the Clifton suspension bridge. The point is this. We may look at that superb piece of architecture today and see something big and strong, but it started out with a very, very fine, weak connection being made.

[4 : 1 3] Although often weak in the beginning, a seemingly small faith can draw us to a stronger and stronger faith.

Every day of our lives, we have different situations. We have to look out for them, but situations that are put before us by which we can take that step of faith. It might be a seemingly tiny, tiny thing, but they're there if we look for them. Where we're called to trust in what we cannot see, to trust the future that we cannot see, because we believe that God is a God who does know that future. And I want you to hold that image of making that connection across the gorge in your mind, because I want to suggest that for every single one of us, including Abraham, faith starts

somewhere.

It has to. And for most of us, it starts with that sense of fear and trembling as we step out into something new. Just think of that very weak connection where a very fine piece of cord from one side of the gorge to the other. But once that connection's made, if that's all there is, well then that's about as strong as it gets. But if we keep on feeding that connection, if we keep on feeding our faith, we keep on feeding our way. And so as more opportunities come our way, as we grow older and we continue to live by faith, reach out and step out into the future that we cannot see, trusting in God as he provides for us day by day. What we have there, I think, is something close to that biblical picture of what it is or what it might be to grow wiser by faith.

As we age. We see this in Abraham and we'll come to him in a moment, but firstly, I want to tell you a story. And it's a story about a man who was crossing a desert many years ago. He was thirsty, not just very thirsty, he was on the verge of death. And he saw ahead of him a pump. And next to the pump, he saw a shack.

[6 : 43] He made his way over to it. He grabbed hold of this dust-covered pump, couldn't find what to do with it, went inside the shack. And he went inside this very creaky shack. He saw a bench, and on the bench was something covered over by a very dusty cloth. He removed the cloth, and underneath was a corked vessel, like a jug. And attached to that was a very old-looking note. The note said this.

There is just enough water in this jug to prime the pump, but there won't be if you drink any water first. The well beneath the ground has never gone dry. Pour the water into the top of the pump and pump the handle quickly. It will work. After you have had a drink, refill the jug for the next person who comes along. What would you do in that situation? Wouldn't that be agonizingly difficult? What you need is right there in front of you, and yet you know there's something deep inside that's saying, actually, what you need to do is to let go of the thing that's in front of you in order to make the water really flow. Every single one of us would surely want to drink that which is right there right now.

But only as you let go and pour in faith, pour that which you can see away out of sight, knowing that you're going to die if you don't drink soon. Only if you do that would you be able to make the pump work.

That's a pretty good model of biblical faith. Are we willing to take what we do have, to see the things in our own lives, to recognize them as things that God has done already, and to let go and to trust in God?

Now, later on in the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews, reference is made to Abraham, and it says this in Hebrews 11, faith is the confidence of what we hope for and the assurance of what we do not see.

[9 : 17] It's an easy thing to talk about, but it's a much, much harder challenge to actually live out in our daily lives. So what about Abraham then, and what about this, let's be frank here, weird passage of scripture? We need to rewind a little bit and think a bit about Abraham's story so far. Abraham was called to follow God, and he didn't know where he was going to go, and he was told by God that he would have descendants, even though both he and his wife were advanced in years. They were told that they would have descendants, and not just a few. He was told that he was going to have descendants, and descendants, and descendants, that whole nations were going to eventually come from him. Now, he had indeed, to his astonishment, having taken God at his word, actually found that God was true to his word, and he had been blessed with the next generation. But, at the passage that we join Abraham's story in Genesis 24, which we read just now, we find that that promise has not been completely fulfilled. It seems unresolved, because whilst he has his children, the question of the next generation, in other words, his grandchildren, has yet to be resolved. His son, Isaac, has not even found a wife yet, and so we have this scene where he sends his servant off to bring back a wife for his son. Now, that itself is totally alien to our own cultural experience. It's not something that we perhaps easily identify with. We haven't got time to go into all of those details this morning, but I think one thing we can pull from this, even though it is weird when we look at it in our own experience, one message we can pull out is where he says to his servant, don't worry, an angel will lead you. Put aside the weirdness that we don't understand, just for a few moments, okay? What we have here is a man believing that God is going to be faithful. He cannot see the future, but he believes that God's got it in hand. He's going to sort it out. That person is out there somewhere, and God himself is going to directly make it happen. Now, that

perhaps is a huge oversimplification of a whole load of complexities, but let's just stay with it for the moment.

Because have you ever been in that place where you can see where wonderful things have happened to you already? You have much to be thankful for. The problem, the challenge, is trusting and believing that everything's going to continue to be okay. Because for all sorts of reasons, you look ahead to your future and you can't see it, but there are a lot of things lurking in that future that worry you, that stand in the way. For Abraham, he was near to death. That's the place where Abraham was, and yet he was trusting in God. And then we get to this reference, where Abraham turns to his servant and says, put your hand under my thigh and swear to thee. What's that all about? It's not the only time we find it in Genesis. We find it later on in Genesis 47, where Abraham's grandson, Jacob, see, did fulfill his promise, tells his son, Abraham's great-grandson, Abraham's great-grandson, Joseph, to do the very same thing. Where he's close to death and he says, put your hand under my thigh and swear to me that when I'm dead, you will take me back home to bury me. And in both cases, we have a situation where there's somebody nearing death, and promises are being made, oaths are being sworn over family matters. It's a multi-layered thing going on. It's totally weird to us, but it was a practice in their day. So what on earth was it about?

Well, I'm going to say a word that in my nearly 30 years of being a preacher, I don't think I've ever, ever, ever said before when I've been preaching, but it's all got to do with testicles.

As this promise was taking place, the servant put his hand underneath the thigh, or under his thigh, and swore an oath. You see, Abraham had been promised a seed, and that out of that seed, would be many descendants, whole nations. And so, as that oath was being sworn, so there was literally physical contact with the reproductive organs, knowing what God had already done, and looking ahead to the future. Now, I'm not going to pretend it's not weird. But it's not completely removed from our cultural experience, as we might think at face value.

[15 : 06] An oath is being sworn here. If you're in a court of law, and you're about to give evidence, you swear an oath. And then you go on to testify. That word testify comes from the Latin word for witness, which is testes.

There we go. So, what we have going on, in this scene, is Abraham, an old man about to die. He knows what God's done for him already. He can see that God has blessed him. He can see the good in his life. But his challenge is to trust in the future. A fairly physical reminder of what God has done is right there.

He gets his servant to lay his hand on that place, and swear an oath as he trusts in God that that promise will be fulfilled in the future that he cannot see.

Now, I know that from time to time, when it comes to prayer responses in church, we like to get creative in kind of what we ask you to do, with post-it notes or dropping stones in water.

[16 : 19] But don't worry, we're not going there this morning. I've just got pictures of... Trusting in what we cannot see, but recognising what God has already done.

About a year ago, I was on a training day with some colleagues, and as part of the day, we were invited to draw a timeline of our lives and to mark in every year of our lives along this.

It was like a rolled-out piece of wallpaper. And we were invited to write on that timeline what we would regard as the key events of our lives, the good ones and the not-so-good ones.

And to write in key events, starting school, leaving school, and everything else in between, whatever may have happened to us in our adult lives, the things that brought us joy, what we would recognise as some of the greatest moments in our lives, and also those areas where we felt really, really low.

And we were then encouraged to sort of draw peaks and troughs as to how we were feeling at any point in our lives. The interesting thing was, is that for every single one of us in the room, we noticed there was a pattern.

[17 : 54] But whilst looking back, there were clearly some amazing times when we all felt we were on top of the world, and for all of us, there were times when we really were struggling to carry on. At no point in any of our lives did we find that it was either entirely good stuff going on, or entirely bad stuff going on.

And I think that's a basic truth of what life is like. It's always, no matter how good or how bad it may seemingly get, a combination of the good, the bad, and the ugly.

And sometimes when we're really down there, it's hard work to see the good. Likewise, it might be quite easy to forget about the bad when things are going really well.

But the truth is, there's always some of it going on. And what the challenge, and we're going to come to pray now, the challenge I want to set before all of us this morning, is this, as we reflect on our own lives, and we all face a future that we cannot see, what points might we be able to latch onto and to recognise as the blessing of God?

And to, with confidence that God is faithful, that God has been faithful, no matter how hard, difficult, challenging that might be at times, to dare to hope and to live in faith for that which is to come.

[19 : 32] So let's do that right now. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that you are faithful.

And in faith, you invite us to trust in those words, that faith is the confidence of what we hope for and the assurance of what we do not see.

And so in the stillness of this moment now, each of us, just take a moment to think about one good thing in our lives.

It might be a recent thing, it might be something happening right now, it might be quite a distant thing, maybe something that happened years, even decades ago, but one thing that represents what we would call goodness.

And something that we are thankful for. Let's just take a few moments, because it's a really personal question, and it's a highly individual one.

[20 : 48] Let's just take a few moments, as we hold one thought in prayer of something good that we are thankful for.

Lord, we hold that one thing in prayer now, and we say thank you.

And whatever it is that we might be giving thanks for right now, and for each of us it will be a different thing, but whatever it may be, help us to see in that your hand.

And Lord, we pray that you would give us the strength as we look ahead to our future now, to remember that which you have blessed us with.

Lord, grow in us that strength of faith, that confidence that even though we cannot see the future, that you are there waiting for us.

[22 : 19] Just as you are right now and have always been. .

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