

Promise, Reward and Responsibility

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] Don't know about you, but these words hit a very, very raw nerve with me, and they do so on two counts, and I want to tell you why. The first reason why this passage hits a really raw nerve is because God says to Abraham, I want you to step out, to leave behind the things that you know that you're familiar with, and I want you to step out and leave those things behind.

I want you to step out into a future that I know all about, but you don't. He's called to trust in something that he can't see, and that hits a raw nerve with me because I know that as I read this, even though it was written a long time ago to somebody in a different place, in a different culture, that that story was recorded for a reason, because it is a story that I know that God wants us to hear today, that whatever our situation, whatever our background, whatever our story, God would place the same challenge to us. He calls us to trust in him in a future that he knows, but we don't. That's what covenant means. That's our theme. We're starting this series over the next few weeks. We start it today. Covenant means just that. God calls us to trust in something that he's set up, that he can see, that he knows all about, but we don't. And one of the things I love about when when a young child is baptised, this morning, Eden has no idea of God and God's love, but God does.

And there's such a powerful symbol there, that deeper meaning of covenant, because it says that God knows all about it, even when we don't. God looks into the future. Ultimately, God is in eternity, and God sees eternity, which we cannot see.

And he calls us to trust. As though everything is sorted.

To live as though everything is in hand. And that hits a raw nerve with me, because I take one look at life, and I know that the daily experience makes that very difficult, because life is full of unresolvedness, and life is full of lists.

[2 : 46] To-do lists. I don't know what your experience is like, but I find that I'm terrible at living from one list to another. I've tried all sorts of ways to try to organise my lists.

Every time I open up my emails, no matter how many I answer, there's more that appear. The same is true of my voicemails. The same is true of my just general jobs. I write down lists. I write down sub-lists. I've tried organising it with post-it notes, with bits of paper.

I've tried organising it on my iPad, in my diary, in my iPad notes. All sorts of things. You can get apps to organise your lists with. I've tried and failed at every single one of them. No matter how big a hole I feel I've whacked into the middle of that list of lists, there's more lists that appear to fill that hole, and then some.

I even get to the point where, including in writing out my to-do lists, I write lists of things I've already done, so that I can have the satisfaction and sense of fulfilment of crossing something off the list.

It seems like it never is. Everyone heard the comedian James Acaster. He's sometimes on Live at the Apollo. I think he's hilarious. He was saying that life goes a bit like this.

[3 : 56] You wake up one morning, and then just you come around, and you think, jobs, jobs, jobs. And so you go out and you do those jobs. And then you're lying in the same place on the same pillow that night, and you're thinking, no more jobs, at least for the next few hours.

You wake up the next day, and again, jobs. A few hours later, same pillow. No more jobs. Next day, jobs.

A few hours later, no more jobs. This goes on throughout your whole life. Then one day, for the last time, you close your eyes. No more jobs. Somebody once said, it's a very well-known sort of analogy, isn't it?

It's like painting the fourth bridge, you know, that takes so long to paint that by the time you've finished it, where you started off needs redoing again, except that the analogy is now dead.

Because in 2011, a new type of paint was formulated that is set to last for 25 years. So now they actually can say that they have finished painting the whole bridge.

[5 : 11] Now, I guess we'll need doing it at some point, but you get the analogy. That life is just a continual list of things to do, just to keep things going.

Little wonder that John Lennon wrote in that song many years ago, that life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans. Now, Abraham was not trying to paint a massive great big metal bridge.

Neither was he trying to clear out his emails. But he was 75 years old, and he was called to leave behind his country and his people and the things that made him feel safe and secure and comfortable and to trust that God could see something that he couldn't.

Covenant is when God says to us, and it's a recurring theme throughout Scripture, I know that it's all sorted, ultimately.

That's why Jesus said on the cross as he died, his final words, it is finished. It's what the writer David Murray refers to as the gospel of done.

[6 : 34] Every time we take one look at that sense of unresolvedness, remember, remember, it's done, as far as God's concerned.

Every time you wake up and you see just all the stuff that needs to get done and the stuff you know will not get done by the end of that day, it will still be there, left unfinished. Remember the gospel that says, it is done.

Every time you take a look at your future and that sense of unresolvedness, the sense of worry, the sense of panic over, I just don't know how this is all going to be, I've got so many questions, just remember, that though we can't see it, God can.

And that though we may not feel that we can say it ourselves, God can and does say, it's done. But it's not easy.

It's a challenge. And that's why this story hits a raw nerve with me. But there's a second reason that I mentioned to you there were two, why this particular story hits a raw nerve with me, and it's this.

[7 : 50] That in this really important story, in the whole narrative of the Judeo-Christian faith, we see God at work, and he chooses one man.

Just one guy. Abraham. He singles out one man and blesses him. Lord said to Abraham, leave your country. And he says, I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you, I will curse, and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. One person. That hits a raw nerve with me.

It hits a raw nerve with me, because I feel very uncomfortable when I have this sense that somewhere in Scripture, there seems to be this selectivity at work, this exclusivity.

This exclusivity. I hate the notion of favoritism, and of in some way being exclusive. And yet, here it is that God chooses, singles out one individual to bless.

[9 : 04] I feel deeply uncomfortable about that, and the reason why I feel deeply uncomfortable is we all know exactly what happens as soon as one individual, or group of individuals, get it into their heads that they're the chosen one, or ones.

Because it's not very long, and we don't have to look very far in history, before we see that the moment that mentality exists within a human being, or group of human beings, that they begin to say certain things to themselves and to others.

We are the chosen ones. We are special. We are more important than those of you that are not part of us. You can become part of us, but in order to do so, you have to subscribe to the things that we think.

But until that time comes, we exist as the special few. We occupy that moral zone.

We have more claim on truth, more claim on land, more claim on property, because we are somehow more important. And we see how that exclusive claim on truth and on the higher ground actually breeds a sense of hatred, exclusivity, violence, war, poverty, death.

[10 : 36] It happens. And the story, that story, has been repeated over and over again throughout the history of humanity, and still prevails today.

So as I read this story, I can't help but ask myself, why did God choose to deal early on in history in this particular way with a person?

By singling out one person and saying, I'm going to make you and your people blessed. Why? And I think to myself, logically, it has to mean one of two things.

Either, one, God is really into exclusivism and intends all of those horrible things that I've just described to happen, or two, that there is some kind of necessity for God to choose one person in this particular way.

So which of those options can it be? Well, the first one can't be possible if it is also true, and I believe it is, that Jesus Christ is God's supreme revelation to us of himself.

[11 : 58] If it is true, and I repeat, I believe it is, that God has shown himself more clearly and more fully than in any other time in history through the life and the death and the teachings of Jesus, Jesus, then it cannot be that God intends exclusivity.

Why? Because we look at Jesus and we see the man who teaches us to love, the man who teaches us to think of others as better than ourselves, the man who teaches us and sends us out to reach out across those very boundaries of exclusivity.

So clearly, it cannot be the case that God intends to be exclusive. Which means that logically, there has, therefore, to be a reason why God singles out Abraham.

Let's do an experiment. I'm going to stand in front of you now and make a very bold promise. I want to promise that I want the very best for you.

I want to bless you. And I want to bless you with God's promises and I want to tell you that God loves you, that God has your future in mind and that it's going to be okay.

[13 : 23] And I want to promise you that I'm here for you to pray for you and to keep on blessing you in my prayers. Now, as I say those words to you, you may or may not believe in the truth of what I'm saying.

Other than simply reinforcing your conviction that Russ is a bit strange, the chances are you're probably going to forget very quickly. So let me try a different tack.

I've got a stone here. I want you to imagine I've not only got a stone but a whole bag of stones. Equal to the number of people that are within this room right now.

I'm going to randomly come to Julian. Julian, I've got a stone here. Can you stand up? Sorry, I wasn't going to slightly embarrass you for one moment but this stone I give to you and I'm going to give you this stone because I want you to know that I'm on your side, that I want to bless you, that I want to pray for you because I believe that God has your future in mind, that he loves you more than you can possibly imagine and that even though you look into your future and you don't know what lies there, God does.

And every time you look at that stone, I want you to remember of those words that I say to you this day. Bless you, Julian. And I want you to imagine that not only that but I give Julian at this point the big bag of stones that's equal to the number of people in this room and I say to Julian, what I've just said to you, Julian, I want you to go to two other people, I want you to split that bag in half and I want you to take half the stones and give them to one person and the other half to the other and I want you to go through the same thing that I've just gone through with you and tell them in turn to go on with the stones.

[15 : 20] Thanks, Julian. Now, that's all, let's be honest, a little bit weird, isn't it? But my guess is that if we were, and I would love to have done the experiment with a bag of stones and done it with everyone but we haven't got time this morning to do that but imagine that we had.

So after a few minutes or however long it takes, every single one of us in this room is sat there clutching a stone thinking of somebody that has come up to us as an individual and spoken those words of promise and blessing to us.

Chances are we'd still think that's a little bit weird but we'd still be left with a stone and some words of promise.

Is the stone God? No. Is the stone me or Julian or whoever gave it to you who spoke the words of promise?

No. Is the stone the promise? No. The stone is just a stone.

[16 : 35] But my guess is that of those two different presentations of a set of promises if you were to remember one of them it's going to be the second one.

The reason being is that stone will give weight and substance to the words that have been said and why is that? Because you've been singled out.

And because you've been singled out does that make the words of promise in some way exclusive? Of course not. Through being singled out all that happens is that that which is for everyone suddenly gets close up and personal.

And that's why God had to single out Abraham. That's why God is in the habit of singling people out.

That is why God calls us to baptise not groups of people but individual persons. That is why we share bread and wine at communion not just as groups but as individuals.

[17 : 50] You see God's covenant it's an old fashioned word isn't it but call it promise call it whatever you want but you know those words that God says that he calls you to trust and to know that he knows the future for you even though you don't those words that are so challenging and hit that raw nerve because they seem to be such a radical contradiction from daily experience but God has got it in hand it's done it's finished he's got it sorted we just have to trust in him.

Know that those words are intended for you as an individual as much as they are for everyone collectively. The question is knowing that these words of promise are for you as an individual what are you going to do with it?

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