

Promise or Performance

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[0 : 00] Father, we give you thanks and praise that you do not relate to us according to our performance, but that we can rest on the promise that you have made to us in the gospel, the good news of who Jesus is and what he accomplished for us on the cross.

We ask, Father, that you would pour out the Holy Spirit upon us and bring these precious truths ever deeper into the center of who we are, that we might learn to be a people living out of promise, not out of a need to perform.

And we ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen. Please be seated. So, it's too bad that we can't often just ask questions without people getting defensive or not being in a fight or anything like that.

Just to be sort of clear, like, here's one of the things that have been going through my mind for quite a while now. And some of this, some of what I say might come as a surprise to some of you, some of you won't come as a surprise.

But if you were to go into a coffee shop and see me lining up for coffee, I'm one of that 40% of people not wearing a mask. If you were going to Costco, I'm one of those 30 to 40% of people not wearing a mask.

[1 : 16] So, I'm one of those guys. I hope you still like me after you hear that. But I'm one of those guys. If you're different, that's fine. But here's the thing. I've been thinking, and I say this to people all the time. I sort of wish, not sort of, I actually really do wish that I could have a conversation with some of the people wearing masks.

Like, a conversation just to figure out why you're wearing the mask. And you could ask me why I'm not. And you could express your sort of fears about me, or if you have any, or questioning about me.

And I could ask those things. And, like, there's many, many times I wish I could just go up to people and say, like, you know, you're outside on Bank Street, like, all by yourself, and you're wearing a mask. Why are you wearing a mask?

Like, I'd just like to know. Now, just obviously, it's hard to have, I've never asked anybody that. It's hard to have that conversation. In fact, you worry that they end up turning very quickly into a fight.

And I'm obviously, I'm not going to say that I'm always open to questions, that I'm always just very comfortable with them. Obviously, there are many times I get frightened by questions, or threatened by them, or become defensive.

[2 : 27] But in my better self, my best self, I sort of wish that not only that I could ask good questions, but that I would be open to hearing good questions as well.

But it seems like, in many ways, we live in a culture, in an age where you can't have questions, and you can't ask questions. I mean, there's a range of things that we, you know, I mean, sometimes I do speak about them.

But, you know, we know we get canceled in our culture and everything if you question certain types of fundamental things. So, but I think most of us in our hearts wish that we would be the type of person who can ask a question and be asked a question, an honest one, and have a conversation.

Like, I think that's what we all think in our, that would be our best self. And if you don't think that, then I don't know what I can say to you if you actually don't think that would be a good thing. But I think most of us think that's a good thing.

Now, it's one of the things, the Bible, and sometimes people say to me, you know, George, I could never be a Christian because, you know, Christians aren't allowed to sort of ask questions and stuff like that.

[3 : 36] I have too many questions to ever be a Christian. I want to look at a text today. We're going to look at a text today in Genesis chapter 15, a very, very old Bible text that forms us to ask questions and forms us to see that it's a good thing to ask questions, that God is actually pleased when we ask questions.

So if you would turn with me to Genesis chapter 15, that would be really good. And if you're watching this for the first time or you're here for the first time, we're going through the Abraham stories. That's the sermon series that we're doing.

So we won't do all of them, but we'll do the main ones. We go from Genesis 12 to Genesis 22. And so we've gone through 12, 13, 14, and today it's Genesis chapter 15.

And so here's how the text goes. It begins like this. After these things, Genesis 15, verse 1. By the way, it's always good to bring your own Bible or if you're at home, use your own Bible so it's easier for you to find things later.

But if not, we have it up on the screen for you to be able to follow along. After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. Fear not, Abram. I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great.

[4 : 48] So just sort of pause here for a second. You'll notice it begins with after these things. So what's going on? Well, what's just going on before this is that basically there was a superior and larger sort of group of nations in Mesopotamia.

And in the story before this, they sort of controlled this rough area. And there was a bit of a revolt. And the Mesopotamian armies came down.

Four armies merged to be as one. And then they came down and they defeated a whole pile of people groups, not that many miles away from where Abram lived. And then they circle around to attack the five small city-state kingdoms that had been rebelling against them.

And they defeat them in battle. And then they leave with all of their plunder and their slaves. And the people are going to hold for ransom and all their treasure.

And Abram has discovered that his nephew Lot, who separated from him, has been one of the people captured. So Abram takes off with a small number of forces and is actually able to defeat the invading armies of the superior culture in Mesopotamia.

[6 : 04] And rescue his nephew. And then the bulk of the part just before that is the two different ways to respond to this. And actually what it is, is the king of Sodom shows to respond to it by not living in the real world.

And Melchizedek shows how you respond to this by living in the real world. And that's what we talked about a little bit before, how pride and arrogance leads us to not live in the real world.

And this type of humility and faith leads us to live in the real world. So that's just what's gone before it. So, you know, one of the things which is very interesting, if you ever do a bit of a word study about the Bible, it's amazing how often in the Bible that God speaks to his people and says, don't be afraid.

Like, it's actually quite astounding. If you actually go back and just look in the gospel, the number of times that Jesus says, don't be afraid, there's quite a few of them and they're all at very significant times. Because it's obviously the case that fear is an important thing.

Anxiety is an important thing for us. And God doesn't want us to be fearful. In fact, actually, it's not going to be the sermon. But the main thing that really struck me this week actually was that idea of fear. It was this thing here which led me to a substantial prayer throughout the week and meditation upon my own life.

[7 : 20] And about the role that fear and anxiety has in my own life. But I'm not going to make that the sermon because it's just a bit of an aside. But Abram's probably feeling a little bit fearful about what he's just done.

It's a little bit like when we lived in our previous parish. There was a time, it was probably a night like last night. It was unseasonably warm. And Louise and I were sleeping in the rectory which was right next door to one of the church buildings that I cared for.

And in the middle of the night, I think my wife woke me up and said she heard the sound of laughing, male voices laughing and the breaking of glass. And I look out the window and I see the four young guys.

And I go down and go out the front door and stand on the steps. And I ask them what they've done. And we have this brief interchange. And I say, you know, I know you've done something.

I know who you are. And as I got back in the house, my wife said, George, that wasn't actually the smartest thing in the world to do. Is to confront four guys late at night all by yourself on your front steps.

[8 : 22] And it might be something like that for Abram. He's done this amazing thing. And now afterwards, he's thinking, I don't know if that was the smartest thing in the world to take on the Mesopotamian armies. Now I have a big mark on my back.

So God speaks this word of encouragement. He wants it again. Fear not, Abram. I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great. How does Abram respond?

Well, Abram responds in a very, very interesting way. He asks two questions of God. Look what he says, verse 2. But Abram said, O Lord God, what will you give me?

For I, in other words, you've said, you know, there's going to be a great reward. But Abram says, you know, O Lord God, what will you give me? For I continue childless, and the heir of my house is a leaser of Damascus.

And Abram said, behold, in Hebrew it's emphatic, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir. Now, this is very interesting.

[9 : 23] And that Abram goes ahead and asks these questions. My mic's falling apart. That Abram goes ahead and asks these questions of God. Like, really?

You're going to do these things? Like, how are you going to do these things? And what's really interesting about the story, you see, and this is where these ancient stories in this, our Jewish friends called the Tanakh.

We call it the Old Testament. And these questions that, over time, became very formative in our culture, created a culture where questions were seen as good things, not bad things.

I mean, it took time. It takes time for stories to form us. But these stories form us because God, Abram asked these questions of God, and God doesn't get mad at Abram.

He doesn't say, oh, come on, Abram. Like, you know, smarten up. You know, come on, dude. Like, just, or how dare you question me, or anything like that. God doesn't react badly, as the rest of the story will show. So, in fact, what it shows is for those who say that they have too many questions to ever be a Christian, and the implication is, is that we Christians don't have any questions.

[10 : 32] And, of course, that actually can be a fair description of some Christians. Some Christians do just sort of, I remember when I became a Christian, you know, and I only have warm thoughts of the people who played a role in me becoming a Christian.

But when I started to begin to have some real intellectual questions about how Christianity fit with things, their response to me was just, you need to pray more and believe more. Like, that was their response, to sort of just shut me down.

You just need to pray more. You just need to believe more. Well, that doesn't really cut it. Didn't cut it for me, at least. And so the fact of the matter is that, I mean, people might have met Christians like that who just don't believe in asking any questions.

You just have to believe by faith. You just have to have more faith. You need to go and sing praise songs for an hour solid and get all pumped up, and that will deal with you. I mean, that obviously is a—we human beings have something within us whereby we don't really like questions, especially questions of us.

But the fact of the matter is, as we see in this story, is that Christianity forms us to ask questions, to welcome questions. And the fact of the matter is, is that faith, in a sense, almost propels us to ask questions.

[11 : 50] Because Abram's generally—it's because he has faith, which we're going to see in a moment, that Abram's puzzled by what God says. His questioning doesn't come out of arrogance.

It doesn't come out of idolatry. It doesn't come out of anything like that. It's just, okay, God, you said this, but how is that going to work exactly? Like, how can that possibly work? It's an honest question, which is created by faith.

So how does God answer? Well, look at verse 4. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him. Just sort of, Matt, remember, Abram's having a vision.

And one of the things that the Bible does here, it doesn't record what Abram sees in the vision. All it records is the words, the key words in the vision. Okay?

So verse 4 again. And behold, the word of the Lord came to Abram. This man, that's referring to Eliezer, shall not be your heir. Your very own son shall be your heir.

[12 : 51] And in the original language, there's a very graphic image that from your own body, the son will come. And then verse 5. God brought Abram outside and said, look toward heaven and number the stars.

If you're able to number them. And he said to him, that's God said to Abram, so shall your offspring be. And Abram believed the Lord.

And the Lord counted it to Abram as righteousness. So. Now, if you're all like me, this seems like a weird thing.

Remember, I've just tried to tell you that it's fine to ask questions of the text. Like, honest questions. And to many people, it would. So, like, what exactly does it mean here that, I mean, why is it that this is convincing to Abram?

Why is it that God gives him this vision and says, you know, and then takes him out and says in the vision, go look at the stars at night. And if any of you have been really out where it's very, very, very rural and it's a cloudless night, you know how many stars you can see.

[13 : 59] And you can well imagine back then. I mean, unless there had been a volcano or something that caused you not to be able to see the stars very well. If it was a clear night, you'd really see lots of stars.

And why is it that God just saying this creates a type of whatever this thing is about verse 6, that God realizes that Abram believes him and that believing of him is counted to him as righteousness.

Like, what goes on here? Well, I guess all I want to say about it, I want to say a couple of things about it. The first thing I want to say is that this actually describes something profoundly human.

That many of us experience in life. Where somehow inside of us, there's a bit of a sea change. We might not, some of us might actually know when that sea change happens.

Sometimes it might be, it takes a little while to realize that there's this sea change within us. But we have this thing where there's a sea change within us. And we, so here's how, it tends to come, let's say in two particular areas or three particular areas.

[15:10] One of them is in terms of romance or love. The other one is in friendship. And the other one is sort of in, just sort of a way to understand the world. And sometimes we can have known a person for many, many, many years.

And then one day you realize that somewhere along the line you've fallen in love with them. Or that, and you might even remember that it was a particular walk or a particular thing.

And there's nothing particularly special about that thing. But you just know afterwards that somehow during that time, there's a change in you.

And before you weren't in love with them and now you are. Or that you've, there's somebody that you've seen or been in your class for a long time. And then one day you're having coffee and you realize, you know what, we're friends.

Like I really like this person. And you're not quite sure when that sea change happened. I had, not only in becoming a Christian later on, I had a significant change in sort of my philosophical, political ways of understanding the world.

[16:14] And it's the same type of thing. I could tell you sort of when that began to happen. Although it wasn't until later on that I realized that it began to happen. And if I told you, you'd probably say, really?

Like that did it? That doesn't make any sense. And on one level it doesn't make any sense. But that's just the way human beings are wired. That something happens and we realize that we've crossed over a different type of, into a different type of world.

Interior world. And so verse 6. And Abram believed the Lord and the Lord counted it to him as righteousness.

Some of you might know that this is actually a very significant verse in the New Testament. Romans chapter 4 gives an extended meditation and explanation of the text.

Galatians 3 does it and James 2 does it. Where they take this text and say this is something, this is in a sense giving us a very basic picture of what it means to become a Christian.

[17:17] And what the good news of the gospel is. That it's not just so much that you believe God. Because as both the Old Testament and the New Testament will show you can believe God.

I mean demons believe in God. But it's not just that you believe in God's existence. But you actually believe what he says and promises in a way that's not just an intellectual assent.

But a turning of yourself. To believe the promise. To believe that he's trustworthy. To believe that it's true. And that shift, as I said, whether it's in why I went from being extremely left wing to rejecting it.

And I told you the incident. You go, well that doesn't make any sense. And I'd say, well that doesn't just make any sense. But that's just the way human beings are. Like we make these shifts inside who we are.

And the basic nature of the gospel here is. And it's going to become solidified in what happens in the next few verses. Is this. Like credited to him means that God treats you a different way.

[18 : 22] Righteousness in a sense fundamentally means a right relationship with God. And God takes this shift of Abram saying, okay well I'm 75 years old.

My wife's 65 years old. Or 77 and 67. We've never been able to have children. I'm 77. Did I say that? She's 67. 67 year old women don't have babies.

And we've been married for a long time. And I don't really deserve God to have done miracles for me.

Like I'm not worthy of it. And this is definitely not something that I can do. Like there's no fertility drugs or surgery. And it's not just a matter of having lots and lots of sexual knowing.

And something like it's just not going to happen. And just. But at some point in time there's this moment where Abram just believes in what God says. That this promise.

[19 : 27] This offer. Of unmerited. Undeserved. Blessing. To the. For one in whom it's impossible for him to do it himself.

That that's just who God is and what he does. And what he's offered to me. And I accept it. I accept it. And in the New Testament. What this is saying is.

That this is in a sense is pointing us down the road. To what. Happens with Christ. That. You hear this story. Of a. Of a. Of a man who. Lived the life.

That you should live. But you've never lived. But he lived this perfect life. And he dies this death upon the cross. And this understanding. This.

This proclamation. That Jesus suffered all of the trials and temptations that human beings suffer. But every time he. Is in a trial. Or he's tempted. He never succumbs to do the evil.

[20 : 24] He always is able to resist it. And he never breaks his unbroken fellowship with the father. And he lives the life that human beings should live. To actually be able to. To be in a relationship with God.

He actually does it. We don't. I don't. But he does it. And. And. And if people knew all of the bad things that I had done in my life. And. And all of the bad thoughts that I've had. And. And you would demand.

The first thing you would say is. You can no longer be a minister. And then. I could no longer be married. I could no longer be a dad. I couldn't be a granddad. And. And. And it would go on and on and on. Because I would be seen to be a very very terrible person.

You thought that. You thought that. You did that. You said that. Like. How. How could you. But. The punishment that would be. Needed. For people to think that their justice had been done.

To me. I. I could never. I could never do that. Myself. I. But Christ does it for me. The death. He dies. He dies.

[21 : 21] In my place. To suffer the consequences that. I should suffer. And he does it in my place. And he does it out of love. And he does it to me.

Knowing the worst about me. He does it for me. Knowing the worst about me. I mean. He knows the best about me. But he knows the worst about me. He knows the worst of the worst. And still he does it.

And that the message of the gospel is. Is that. If you just believe this word. And not just believe it. But believe that Jesus. Who he is.

And what he's done for you. If you. Put your hands. And trust him to be your savior. Then he. Pays the penalty. That you could never pay. And he clothes you with the rightness.

That rightness with God. That you could never attain. And that's this gift. This transaction. This gift. That creates.

[22 : 16] Now this new relationship. With you have. With God. Which is purely and utterly gift. Purely and utterly gift. And to say yes to that.

And to have a sense within you. That that actually is true. And that offer is for me. In my particularity. And I. I. I can say yes to that. And it's real.

The New Testament writer said. That's sort of what's going on here. Now. Here's the questions. By the way. The text doesn't ask these questions.

That later on. And as the Old Testament performs. But we can ask these questions. In fact. Just as the way I've described it. You see. What. If.

If. If the Bible ended right here. It would just seem like a weird thing. And it would seem like an unjust thing. Because one of the things. That's going to be very clear. Next week. We're going to see. I mean. We've already seen.

[23 : 13] How Abram's done some bad things. And next week. We're going to see how. I mean. They had a very dysfunctional marriage. That's what we would now call it. And.

And him. Next week. We're going to see. After this. This gift. That. He. He isn't worthy of the gift. He's going to. They're going to treat. Hagar and Ishmael.

Atrociously. And murderously. And so. This text is pointing. It's setting up a riddle. As to how can God do something like that.

In a way that makes him still just. Christ. Like that would be the question. You would have reading this text. Just as you would have other questions. Like how is it. That Abram's going to have as many. Offspring.

As you can see in the stars. They're going to have this little bit of land. There's too many people for this land. Like. There's. These promises. They create puzzlement. And questions. That mean that God's going to have to keep making things clear.

[24 : 11] And making things clear. And at the end of the day. It doesn't really become clear. Until Christ comes. And when Christ comes. We can see how God. Can do something like this for Abram. In a way. Because he.

The Lord himself. Will be the lamb. Of God. Who dies. To take away the sin of the world. It's only as we see down the road. How it is.

That something like this for Abram. Can be true. But it's. It's describing. I mean. It's describing.

And saying. That it happens in a real. And authoritative way. Some of us. Have had the experience. Of. Realizing. Maybe that we're married. To somebody that we don't deserve. Or we have kids that we don't deserve.

Or we've been loved beyond our deserving. And these in all. Are in small ways. We don't quite know how to deal with that. And these are all. In some small ways. Pictures. Of this profound message. Of the cross.

[25 : 05] And that our relationship with Christ. And with the Lord himself. Is going to be rooted. Not in. Our performance. But in our accepting this.

Outrageous. Promise. An offer. That God. Gives us. Now.

Immediately after this story happens. God does something to help solidify. I have to watch my time. That solidify the promise. To Abram. Look at what happens in verse 7.

And he. That is. The Lord. Says to Abram. I am the Lord. Who brought you out. From Ur of the Chaldeans. To give you this land to possess. But here's the third question.

But Abram says. Oh Lord God. How am I to know. That I shall possess it. You see. It's a similar thing. Remember I said. That I only have very.

[26 : 04] Very warm thoughts. For all of the people. Who played a role. In my conversion. But I do know. That when they just told me. You just got to believe. Like you just need to sing. You need to sing more praise choruses. Just pray more.

You don't have to ask these questions. You don't have to know. And. That wasn't sufficient. Abraham has a bit of a similar. Type of a thing. To this promise. He says. How do. How am I to know.

That I'm going to possess the land. And in verse 9. God says. Well here. Here. Here's this. God's going to answer. In a very very counterintuitive way. Verse 9.

The Lord said to Abram. Bring me a heifer. Three years old. A female goat. Three years old. A ram. Three years old. A turtle dove. And a young pigeon.

So the three animals. Are in the prime of their life. And Abram brought the Lord all these. He kills them. Cuts them in half. And laid each half over against the other.

[27 : 02] But he did not cut the birds in half. And when the birds of prey came down in the carcasses. Abram drove them away. And just to make sure you're understanding the image. It's perfect in this facility.

So. You kill the heifer. And you cut the heifer in half. And you put one half. Let's say where that seed is. And you put the other half there. And then you take the goat.

And you put one half of the goat there. And the other half of the goat there. And then you take the ram. And you put one half of the ram there. And you have the other half of the ram there. And you kill the turtle dove. And you put the turtle dove there.

And what's the other animal that got the other bird that got killed? The pigeon. And you put the other dead pigeon there. And there's a space between them. And this for millennium.

Was a very ancient way in that part of the world. that went on for millennium of how you made covenants, which is sort of a little bit like a contract. And Abram leaves them on either side.

[28 : 01] And then God's going to continue to give him this knowing. Look at verse 12. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram.

And behold, a dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. That's Abram. Then the Lord said to Abram, Abram is now in a deep sleep, in a place of dread.

In the midst of the dread and the darkness, the Lord said to Abram. Now this is going to be a little bit, I mean, this is really, this is one of these things for us as Christians, it would be a whole other topic of a sermon about how the Lord's delay does not mean that the Lord isn't going to do something and that part of what it means to be a Christian is to learn how to wait upon the Lord.

Because listen to what he says here. Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in the land that is not theirs and will be servants there. And they will be afflicted for 400 years.

It's a rough period of time. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve. And afterward, they shall come out with great possessions.

[29 : 16] I mean, in hindsight now, we see that that's the whole deliverance of Egypt with Moses. As for you, God says, you, Abram, shall go to your fathers in peace.

You shall be buried in a good old age. And they, that's your offspring, shall come back here in the fourth generation. For the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.

Now, those of you who know me know that I don't like to try to just rush through certain types of awkward things. I almost thought about making this the whole thing of the sermon, but it's not the right place to make the whole thing of the sermon.

And this is a very, very, like just, if you're watching this online and you're a seeker, just give me like a bit of a time out, give me some mercy. But this is a very, very sobering text for us.

Like I have to confess, when you look at many of the things going on in Canada, and I'm not being political, I'm just saying there are many things going on in Canada that are very evil and very foolish. And I worry that we're under the judgment of God.

[30 : 22] I'm just sharing my heart. Like I worry, and I pray that we as an, our nation is not under the judgment of God. I pray that you'll have mercy.

Because there's this very powerful text that says that God judges nations. In fact, it gives a bit of a precursor to what's going to happen when Egypt, Israel has left, leaves Egypt, the land of bondage and slavery to go into the promised land.

And what he's, God is saying is that this isn't just naked aggression. This isn't holy war. This is God's justice as well as God's provision.

What he's saying is that in heaven, for those of us who are in heaven, by grace through faith in Christ, when God actually makes the secret of what's been going on very plain to us, that we will look and say that what God did in bringing Israel into Egypt wasn't evil but was an act of justice and mercy.

But it's jumping way ahead in the story. But here's the shocking thing. Now, just to get a picture of this, lately I watch certain types of movies just to relax, and I'm watching, you know, one thing, and it has one of these standard non-disclosure agreements.

[31 : 40] You have like sort of like a nobody type guy, except he's the hero, and he goes to speak to this multi-billionaire, and the multi-billionaire wants to hire him, and before the multi-billionaire will even say a certain type of thing, the nobody, the hero, has to sign a non-disclosure agreement, which is pages and pages long, and basically threatens dismemberment, castration, jail time, murder, torture, like a whole range of things, if he ever says anything that's about to happen in the conversation.

And so basically the nobody has to sign this, but the rich guy doesn't have to sign anything. You know what? I'm the multi-billionaire. I don't sign things like that. You know, you sign this, right?

And we could expect that if we were going to somehow or another have some type of relationship with some multi-type of billionaire, they, you know, they basically, especially if it's going to be something that's profitable to us, is they, in fact, it's not even unusual.

If you read those types of books and all, it's not unusual for people in positions of power to say, I'm not even going to write a contract. You just know, you just, you do this, you know, and I'll look after you. I'm not going to, you know, and it's all on you.

Like if you screw up, it's all on you, right? The only person who has to, in a sense, sign the contract, so to speak, or really be in any type of trouble with all the conditions, is the weak person, not the... I know there's contract law, and it doesn't work.

[32 : 59] Then you can take Apple to court. I'm guessing if you took Apple to court, 17 years later it would finally be resolved, and you've been bankrupt seven times. But that's a whole separate matter, right? You fundamentally can't do it, because powerful people, that's what they do.

However, if it was just, say, me and Chris making a contract, you know, we're equals, and, you know, we'd sort of make the things, we'd negotiate something out, and it would all be type of equal. So what they did in the ancient world, the reason they would cut animals in half and put one half there and one half there, and there's a text in Jeremiah that beautifully describes this ancient custom, is basically what happens is, okay, you know, Chris and I, we're going to make this contract, and this covenant, and what we do is, after we've agreed to the terms, we walk between the dead animals.

And when we walk between the dead animals, what we're saying is, if you break this, this is what's going to happen to you. You see this heifer killed, cut in half? That's what's going to happen to you if you don't fulfill the terms.

And so in the ancient world, it might be that if two kings were making a contract, they'd both walk between them. But if it's an emperor and me, I walk between them.

The emperor doesn't walk between them. I mean, how on earth am I going to actually kill the emperor? I walk between them. And so you'd think that what's going to happen here is that God is going to make this covenant.

[34 : 17] I mean, Abram's realizing that God's going to make a covenant with him, and he's in a deep sleep, and God's made all these promises. And so what you would naturally expect now is that God would have Abram walk between the dead animals.

But what happens? Look what happens in verse 17. And when the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, To your offspring I give this land from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, and on it describes the different nations.

You can't see God. God's invisible. What God does is the only person who walks between the dead animals is God. Not Abram.

Abram doesn't walk between them. Just God. And God does it in a vision. In fact, actually for some people, the smoke and the fire is going to be, if you're reading later on in the book of Exodus, and you see that God leads the people of Israel out of Egypt by a pillar of smoke by day, and a pillar of fire by night.

[35 : 33] And smoke is connected to sacrifice. It's an image of incense. It's an image of God. Fire is a very clear image of God. And so God provides this image. But the only, why is it that Abram can know?

Because he has this profound vision. And the one who binds himself to fulfill this, and to do what only God can do, is God himself.

Abram does not walk between the animals. And you see, here we see, just to wrap the whole thing up to an end, is this, in a sense, foretaster prefiguring what's going to happen in the gospel.

See, the fact of the matter is, is that only God can give offspring to Abram. Only God can give him the land. Only God can be sovereign over history to have that all these different circumstances work out in such a way that God's word is kept.

Only God is the one who can, in fact, make sure that justice is done and that even if people are, there's some type of a punishment of people, that there's an understanding that's a just punishment because of the great, great, great, great, great, great evil that that nation and that culture has done.

[36 : 50] And for those of us who live in the shadow of the Nazis, we can understand there can be cultures that are so evil that they need to be stopped and destroyed. In the shadow of Auschwitz, we can understand that this is something that is a good thing to happen.

And so there's this forecase and foretaste of God binding himself to do every single thing that has to be done that only he can do so that human beings who are lost in the unreality of their pride, the unreality of thinking that they can live, even though we human beings were dependent upon being of a mother and a father to be given life.

We're completely and utterly dependent upon the mother and father. We're dependent upon gravity. We're dependent upon oxygen. We're completely and utterly dependent. And yet in our minds, we think as if we are God and independent, that we will live forever, that we determine all of these things, that we determine right and wrong, that we determine whether we will deal with God or not, that we have this arrogance that leads us into a constant state of unreality, but by the common grace of God to help us to deal with the real world and that those other longings within us for community, for connection, for gratitude, for generosity, that those things are not extinguished by our pride, but that God in his grace and mercy continues to have these things so that the world goes on and that there is in fact a place for us to live, which is our home, and that it's not just unrelenting evil and pain and suffering for all eternity on human life, but that God does what only God can do in the person of his Son to provide the means by which if we believe what he says and trust him, who he is and what he's done for us, that the performance in a sense is done by Christ and not by us.

There's this forecast, this prefiguring of what God would do for his children and people if they trust him. So last week, they set the stage for the choice between living in the real world.

In the real world, you pay homage to the real God and you live out of gratitude of his promises and his victory, acknowledging that he is the source of these good things.

[39 : 23] Or you live in the unreal world and in the unreal world, you build narratives that make yourself look like the hero and allow you to look down others and don't believe as if there is a real God that does exist and that is the unreal world and the choice is will you live in the real world or the unreal world?

And now the choice before us is this and it's parallel. Will you live your life entirely and utterly depending upon your own view of your own performance performance? Or will you live out of promise?

The promise that comes from God that comes to the unworthy, that comes to the unlikely, that comes to the unsuitable, and that God will do for the unlikely and the unsuitable and the unworthy what only he can do to make you right, me right with him.

Will you live out of promise? Or will you try to live by performance? Will you live out of the real world in your real situation? Or will you live out of the unreal world created by pride?

And we gather on Sunday mornings, if you're at all like me, to say, Lord, I haven't been living out of promises if I should this week.

[40 : 34] I am so glad that I can hear the word and I can gather around the table and I can be remembered of the new covenant, I can be reminded of the new covenant and I can be reminded of the help of the Holy Spirit and I can recommit with my brothers and sisters in Christ to live out of promise.

That's where we gather. And if you are here or you are watching and you feel that little bit of a tug, all I can say to you is that tug is the Holy Spirit saying to have that sea change, not to fight it, but to allow it and then to profess it.

Jesus, I believe you are the means by which I am made right with God. You are the means by which I can start to learn to live in the real world and not the unreal world.

You are the means by which I can live out of promise, not performance and learn to have my pride humbled in such a way, not that I am turned into a doormat, but that I can finally learn to stand and be free, be free from the idols and ideologies of the world that bend and deform me and stop me from asking questions.

That in you, in you alone, I can say free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, I'm free at last. I invite you to stand.

[42 : 05] Just bow our heads in prayer. Thank you. Father, you are all powerful. You are all good.

You are all beautiful. You are all beauty. You are all glory, all majesty. We are none of those things. Father, from all eternity, you have loved the Son and the Son has loved you and the Holy Spirit has loved you and the Father and the Son and it's just been unending love and out of love you created us.

Out of love you didn't destroy us when we rebelled against you and fell. Out of love you prepared the way so that people would understand what your Son was coming to do. Out of love you sent your Son.

Out of love he lived the life we should have lived but could never live. Out of love he died and paid the penalty that we should pay that we could never pay. Out of love the Holy Spirit moved in our hearts to bring us to a faith where we trust in you.

Out of love Father you continue to move by your Holy Spirit and through the means of grace of the Lord's Supper and church on Sundays and of the means of grace of small groups and friendships the means of grace by which we can pick ourselves up when we fall that we can say to each other yes let's recommit to live our lives not out of performance but out of promise.

[43 : 30] And Father we thank you for all these great things and we thank you for them and we ask Lord that you help us to live out of promise. We thank you that we can gather together and we ask Lord that you would help us to live out of promise as we face the problems of our culture the problems of our church the problems in our families the problems in our neighborhoods.

Father may we look at these from the lens of the fact that you are truly God and sovereign that you are a God of love that Jesus is the answer to the problems of the world. May you help us to live out of promise to look at the world out of promise and then Father following the leading of your Holy Spirit that we might deal with those things within and without that need to be fixed for the good of people and for your great glory.

And we ask this in the name of Jesus your Son and our Savior. Amen. Amen. Amen.