

Know for certain

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[0 : 00] We're now going to read the Bible, so if you want to open your Bibles, your devices, scrolls, if you have that. Genesis chapter 15, we're going to read the whole chapter. 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. But Abram said, O Lord God, what will you give me? For I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus. And Abram said, Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him.

This man shall not be your heir. Your very own son shall be your heir. And he brought him outside and said, Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.

Then he said to him, So shall your offspring be. And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness. And he said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.

[1 : 12] But he said, O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it? He said to him, 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.

And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. And when the birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram, and behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. Then the Lord said to Abram, Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be servants there.

And they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.

As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace. You shall be buried in a good old age, and they shall come back here in the fourth generation. For the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.

[2 : 25] When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking firepot 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, the land of the Canaanites, the Canaanites, the Kadamonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, and the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Gergashites, and the Jebusites.

Thank you. Well, good morning, everyone. Well, I once visited a man in hospital, and I didn't know him too well, but he was happy that I came.

And he had got a diagnosis that he knew he was about to die. He was days, maybe weeks. And I asked him, are you ready to meet God?

And his answer to me wasn't surprising, but it left me very sad, because he said, I've lived a long life.

Now, I don't know where that came from. Maybe he didn't know me well, like I just asked one of the most profound questions you can ask. So maybe it was just that. But I do wonder if, as he stares into that deep darkness, that void, how can you know for certain that there is a God, that he's going to reward you?

[4 : 21] I wonder if the question was just, he couldn't go there. You can't know for certain. Maybe the question was too open.

I suspect that was the case, but I can't see his heart. I'm not sure. We need to know for certain. And it's not just for when you're old and on your deathbed, but it's for when you're young.

If you're going to devote your life to God's promises, you want to know for certain, right, that God is going to come good, that he's going to bless you.

If it's going to cost you, you want to know for certain. So the all-important question is, can you know for certain that you can trust God's promises to bless?

I think there's a lot of religious activity that goes on that really is just people trying to make sure, make certain that God will bless.

[5 : 28] I think that produces a lot of religious activity. I think it kind of sees God like this. I'm going to scratch your back, God, if you scratch mine.

Like, does God need your attention right now and during church to feel validated? Are you giving him something that he needs right now?

We just sang a beautiful song. Was he, like, coming to Friday, just feeling a bit in the dumps? Oh, I can't wait till they sing that song again and just make me feel a bit better.

Does he need us? He possesses heaven and earth. We read last week. Does he need our donations? Is that us scratching his back?

We'll help build your church, God. You scratch my back now. Does he need our volunteering? Paul understands from Genesis who this God is, who we've seen this term as we've studied Genesis.

[6 : 38] Paul says in Acts 17, The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything else.

Haven't we seen that from Genesis 1? The true God before the beginning of creation, he didn't need creation to know his identity as creator.

He is blessed. He has deep satisfaction within himself. He is the blessed God. He has deep satisfaction. And he easily creates all things by the word of his power.

He doesn't need anything. In fact, he's the one giving life, breath and everything else. How can you possibly offer anything to such a God?

He doesn't have an itch that you can scratch. A lot of religious activity approaches God as if he's got a few itches that you can help him out with.

[7 : 56] As if that can make you certain that he will scratch your back in return. And that's what the Tower of Babel was about, if we can remember a few weeks ago. It's mankind trying to reach God to offer the sacrifices that God wants so that God comes down and guarantees the blessing.

And it's ridiculous when you think about who God is. He doesn't have any needs. So how do you know he will bless you if you can't scratch his back?

And he will scratch in return. I think other people think, oh, well, it's God's job to bless. That's his job. He's God. It's his job to forgive.

But let's remember Noah's flood. The judge of all the earth's seas.

He can't stand to look on evil because he only loves what is good. The rainbow reminds us the only reason society has life and breath and everything else is because God is incredibly patient.

[9 : 07] My conscience regularly tells me all I've got to bargain with, God, is my failures.

So don't just assume, we can't, from the God we've seen in Genesis, you can't just assume, oh, blessing's automatic to all people.

But nor can we think he has, we can manipulate him to guarantee blessing from him. Now, some other people, I think, claim you can't know for certain.

You can't know for certain that God will ultimately give you life and when we're talking about ultimate things, eternal life. You can't know for certain, some people claim.

Well, to those people, I would say Genesis 15 strongly disagrees with you. Genesis 15 is this defining turning point, a defining moment in human history and it's all about God wanting to assure Abraham so that he can know for certain.

[10 : 30] It's one of these beautiful chapters that I feel so insufficient to preach this morning because it's so wonderful. It's all about assuring Abraham.

You can know for certain. So I hope you're looking forward to it. In Abraham's fear and doubt, we're going to see that it's God's promises that create Abraham's faith and strengthens his faith.

And we see his promises are guaranteed by his covenant of grace. And all this gives an anchor for the soul, even in the face of horror, even in the face of affliction.

So that's where we're headed. I wonder if you know what the most common command in Scripture is.

Apparently, I haven't done the tally, but I'm relying on other sources here. It's do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.

[11 : 45] We see here, Abraham is made of the same stuff you and I are. His faith is mixed with deep fear and doubt.

And the Lord comes to him, Fear not, Abram. I am your shield, your reward shall be very great. Now, why is he afraid?

I think Abram's questions in this passage tell us. He and Sarah are getting into their old age and the stakes are getting higher and higher and higher as each year passes.

He still has the opportunity to return to Ur. Just forget about these promises. Let's just go back to the life I came from where I understand how to make a future there.

We're reading these chapters very quickly, but years are going by, decades. And the fulfillment of these promises are lagging far behind. What good is it, God, if you were my shield all the days of my life?

[12 : 51] You might give me lots of riches even if it all comes to nothing. If it all goes to this relative Eliezer. What good is it in the end?

I think Abraham is staring into that dark void. God might be with him all his days, but there's no future ahead.

And he's getting older. Increasingly, he can't see a way for God to come good on his word of promise. Don't you find that you often, are you like me?

We pray for things when we can imagine how God could answer. Like, oh, I think God possibly could do this. Okay, I'll pray that. But we can hesitate when we just can't see a way.

Abraham can't see a way. I love the gentleness of the Lord in this passage. He doesn't scold Abraham. He's already given his word.

[14 : 03] He could have just said, I've told you, that's enough. But he doesn't. He comes to him and he reiterates the promise. He gives a clear reply.

He doesn't even mention the servant's name. This one. This one you're talking about. He won't be your heir from your very own body. A son will come. He doesn't explain how it's possible.

I think he actually makes the promise a lot, lot harder to believe. He takes him outside and

Abraham's night sky would have been filled without all the light pollution we're surrounded with.

It must have been filled. I'm driving here this morning on the windscreen, just all these little dots of water on the windscreen. It must have just been filled, the night sky that he was singing.

God amps up the situation. So shall your offspring be. Your eyes are on you and Sarah in your old age.

[15 : 10] You think it's impossible to have even one son. Look at who I am. I'm the creator who called these stars into existence out of nothing. Could the one who made these innumerable stars then fail to uphold his promise?

I love looking at the sky we can see. I love the Southern Cross because I can't remember which of the stars it is, but one of them, the closest one outside our solar system, is it's over 88 light years away.

And I always think 88, I probably won't live to 88. I might. That's older than my lifespan. I don't know, for some reason that really comforts me.

That might freak you out, but it really comforts me. God is constant. My life is temporary. He's constant. I think the Lord here is blowing Abraham's restricted time frame of his own lifespan because he's not going to see this in his own lifespan.

But a multitude you can't count. And if you're believing in Jesus today, you're one of those stars. It's an interesting way to speak into Abraham's fear, isn't it?

[16 : 41] Abraham, in effect, is saying, I can't see how it's possible. And the Lord goes, so? So what? You don't need to know.

Get out of your own head. Get out of your own restricted expectations. Look at who I am. Look at my word of promise. The reward, I promise, is so very great if you think outside of your own lifespan, even, your own capacity.

And here we have one of the most important verses in the Bible about what God wants from us. Someone's described it this way, Genesis 15, 6.

Here is a picture of a human being and God in right relationship. Here it is, this verse. He believed the Lord.

And the Lord counted it to him as righteousness. I think there's great comfort here if you fear your faith isn't genuine or doubts plague you.

[18:01] Like, I sometimes think, I don't know if these thoughts come into your mind. I'm like, will I still be trusting in 10 years' time? Do those thoughts, especially if someone you've really respected, trips up?

If you think your faith is your own doing, this verse is really, really comforting. Because look at what created Abram's faith.

It wasn't anything inside Abram. He's filled with fear and doubt. He's afraid. It's what's outside of him that creates his faith.

It's God's word of promise that creates the faith. Abram doesn't conjure it up. It's the word that creates his faith and strengthens it.

I'm going to read an extended quote from the ex-principal of Moore College.

[19:08] We had him at a church camp a few years ago at John Woodhouse. Because he just summarises it really well. To see what true Christian faith is, he compares it with a bunch of imitations.

He says, Since God has spoken, right relationship consists in this, his word and our faith in him created by his word.

Take away his word and you have nothing. You may have superstition that pretends to be faith.

You may have traditions that pretend to be Christianity. You may have religious feelings. You may have wise counselling. You may have a diary filled with good works.

But without the word of God, there will be no faith in God. No right relationship with God. This is the picture of a human being and God in right relationship.

[20:19] His word creating faith in his word. Our faith will last because it's his word that creates and strengthens our faith.

Isn't that good news? Well, Abram has the audacity to kind of ask another question. How do I know?

How do I know? How can the Lord be trusted to keep his promises? We know because he guarantees his promise by his covenant of grace.

Now, we might think of grace. It's in our church name. We might think of grace as the forgiveness we receive when we slip up. If that's our definition of grace, that's true.

But it's just the tip of the iceberg of what grace means. That's just the fruit that comes from the tree. Here we see the root system of what grace is.

[21:31] And it looks like a cow, a goat and a ram cut in pieces and making a bloody aisle. There's grace.

Emma and I turned 11 yesterday. And we re-watched the video montage of our wedding ceremony. And after publicly declaring our promises, there's shots of us signing the marriage certificates. Now, imagine if instead, you know where I'm going, we cut up some animals at the end of the ceremony and we placed it down the aisle, each half on either side.

And then Emma and I walked down. And there's this bloody aisle. And we walked down hand in hand.

And we're basically saying, may this be done to me if I break this covenant. That's powerful.

[22:39] I kind of wish we did it. I'm not sure what Emma thinks. I haven't run this by. It's too late now. But I have a feeling I'm not going to get as many requests to run a marriage ceremony soon.

But may this be... That's what this was about. There were different kinds of covenants in the ancient world.

And sometimes when there was a regional power like the Hittites or the Babylonians later on, and there was these smaller states, then they made an agreement.

Like, we're going to protect your borders. We're going to look after you. You pay your taxes. Give full allegiance to us. And sometimes they cut up these animals.

They called down curses of what would happen if they broke the agreement. And, of course, it's the big bully who is the superpower who would bring about those curses if the little states disobeyed.

[23:37] And it would be this superpower king and the servant walking together. Or it would just be the servant walking down that bloody aisle. May this be done to me if I break this covenant.

Because when God said, get the animals, Abraham seems to know what's coming. He knows what to do with them. He knows that a covenant is coming. He goes into a deep sleep and he sees a burning oven and a torch.

Apparently those were the same images we see at Mount Sinai and in the wilderness after the exodus. How do I know, Abraham asks, how do I know that you'll keep your promises?

The Lord walks down the bloody aisle. Please excuse my language. I literally mean that.

He walks down. The Lord walks down. But how does Abraham know that he himself will keep his side of the agreement?

[24 : 53] The Lord walks down alone. The Lord is committing himself to keep his side and he's taking responsibility for Abraham's side.

The Lord is saying, may I be like these animals if I or you don't keep this agreement? That's grace. It is not.

And I'll scratch you all back if you scratch mine. It's not even God saying, Abraham, for the times you slip up, I'll give you some mercy. It's the Lord saying, I'm going to take sole responsibility for his and Abraham's side of this relationship.

May this be done to me. That's grace. Grace. And it gives an anchor.

An anchor for the soul. If you're in a boat, I've never been in this situation. I'm just imagining this would be the case of any nautical people out there.

[26 : 15] you're in a boat, wild storm, you drop the anchor. If that anchor is still just in the water, even if it's deep water, it's not far enough, is it?

It's not going to hold you. Hebrews 6 uses this metaphor of an anchor referring to Abraham. It's what you pin your hopes on.

If you're pinning your hopes on your circumstances, your circumstances change. It's like that flowing water. If you're pinning on your own capacity, your own capacity changes.

Your anchor's not deep enough. If you're pinning it on any human being, any created thing, even a government, it changes. Your anchor's still just in the water.

But if your soul is anchored to the immovable bedrock of who God is and his covenant of grace, you're good.

[27 : 21] It doesn't move. You can even face horrible affliction and have peace. The Lord says, I will surely give the land.

And then he tells Abraham what's got to come. And it's a horrible picture. Now, I think the sight of all this history was overwhelming to Abraham's mind and soul.

I think that's what the deep darkness that falls on him is about. It is this horror at seeing what it's going to take for God to keep his promises.

There is a lot of affliction first. Now, having this shown to Abraham, his descendants would have known, when they're in the midst of that affliction, they would have known that God had made this promise.

He's the Lord of history. They would have looked around while they were enslaved and seen no evidence that God was for them. But they would have known this.

[28 : 44] He's the Lord of history. One reason we are told that Abraham was told this future is that the Amorite sin isn't full, isn't complete yet.

Yes, Joshua will lead God's people to receive the land, but not one hour before justice requires it. God is just in the way that he's going to fulfill these promises.

It would have given assurance to his descendants, but here's the question that's gone through my mind. Why did Abraham need to experience it? Why this horror and deep darkness that overwhelmed him?

I think perhaps that is what caused his deep sleep. It overwhelmed him. Why did he need to experience this? I can see two reasons from the surrounding context.

One is the immediate context. The covenant was about to be made. He got the animals ready. And he probably thought, I'm about to walk through this and make this agreement.

[29 : 58] But when he saw what it would take, the horror first, that overwhelm, he was incapacitated. He couldn't. And so what a relief that the Lord took full responsibility.

So I think it pushed him to love the fact that God takes sole responsibility for this covenant. But I can see another reason as well. If we zoom out to Abraham's life, I should have looked this up before this very moment, but I think it's about 10 years after this moment of the covenant that Isaac

comes.

Still many years until God comes good on the promise. And then Isaac is about 13 years old. When the Lord tested him in terms of sacrificing him. I think having this foretaste of the horror beforehand, I think it tells us that when Abraham walked with the Lord, he had the opportunity to go back to Ur, but he saw what it would take, and he trusted God's covenant, even though he knew affliction came first.

I think getting this now meant that he did it voluntarily. He saw the promises from afar, Hebrews 11 says.

[31 : 40] He had no visible evidence of the Lord giving the land. He had no idea how it would be possible. He knew that suffering came first. So what was he clinging to?

It was the covenant of grace. That was his anchor for his soul. That's what sustained his walk of faith, to inherit the promises.

There came a descendant after Abraham whose soul was also filled with horror at the sight of the darkness and affliction that it would take for God to fulfil his promises.

This man didn't sleep, but he was so afraid at what he saw that he was sweating drops of blood. He said to his friends, my soul is very sorrowful, even to the point of death.

He was shown what was about to take place and it overwhelmed him. He had opportunity to run away.

[32 : 59] He pleaded with God three times, take this cup from me. This cup of covenant curse, this cup of suffering was set before him and he saw it.

It was like being shown the fiery furnace before you're about to be thrown in and he had an opportunity to run away.

But three times, not my will but yours be done. He did it voluntarily. He trusted his father's plan.

Do you see why Jesus willingly went to the cross from Genesis 15? How dare we think of him as I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine.

He went down that bloody aisle because of the covenant with Abraham. He went down voluntarily.

[34 : 15] Everyone abandoned him. He walked down it alone. He took sole responsibility for his side of the covenant and ours. He kept his promise and he bore the curse for us breaking the covenant.

That's grace. God keeps his promises and we know that looking at the cross. And knowing that covenant of grace, that crushes the serpent's head.

The lie that Adam and Eve believed, it crushes the lie that God is not good. He is so good that he took sole responsibility to make sure that we receive all his promises.

And that gives us an anchor for our soul. Will you pray with me? Let's pray. Oh, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of you, God.

How unsearchable are your judgments and how inscrutable are your ways. For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor? Or who has ever given a gift to him that he might be repaid?

[35 : 52] For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we thank you for your covenant of grace.

In Jesus' name. Amen.