

A Return to Faith, Despite Appearances

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[0 : 00] Well, I'm sure you've all heard the expression that appearances can be deceiving. And sometimes you see that on those singing shows, you know, someone like the X Factor or someone's got talents or something.

And the person walks out and they look very ordinary, but then out comes a very extraordinary voice. And the one that really stands out for me is Susan Boyle. Do you remember Susan Boyle? Well, she's a Scottish superstar now. She appeared on Britain's Got Talent. And the way that she spoke and acted, like she was a bit of a character, she was a bit quirky, it led the judges to assume that she could not sing until she did.

Have a look at her first audition on the next slide. My name is Susan Boyle. I'm nearly 48, currently unemployed but still looking. And I'm going to sing for you on Britain's Got Talent today.

Hi, what's your name, darling? My name is Susan Boyle. Okay, Susan, where are you from? I am from Blackburn, near Bathgate, West Lothian.

[1 : 07] It's a big town. It's a sort of collection of, it's a collection of villages. I have to think here. I am 47. She doesn't give a chance today.

What's the dream? I'm trying to be a professional singer. And why hasn't it worked out so far, Susan? I've never been given the chance before, but here's hoping it'll change.

Okay, and who would you like to be as successful as? Elaine Page. Elaine Page. What are you going to sing tonight? I'm going to sing I Dreamed a Dream from the Miserables. Okay, big song. Yeah? Yes. Yes. I dreamed a dream in time gone by.

One of those times I'm going to sing. Is it an expert at the dream? Did you? No. All right. I think that'll do it. Thanks, Ryan. I think you need to get back a slide.

[2 : 19] Sorry, Ryan. It's a great story, isn't it? And since then, Susan has sold more than 25 million albums and made more than \$46 million. Not bad.

The point is, appearances can be deceiving, can't they? Sometimes our eyes can deceive us into thinking something that is not true. And this can happen even in our own Christian lives as well. So, for example, the world's way can appear to be easier and better. After all, you can save money for yourself rather than being generous like God. You can put yourself first rather than putting God and others first, which often is easier.

And you can also live out whatever truth you like rather than sticking with God's truth. And let's face it, God's truth is becoming more and more unpopular. And so, for some Christians, the world's way can appear better.

For other Christians, God's way can also appear, well, not to work. So, when we turn on the news and we hear of more strife in the world, then it appears that God is no longer in control.

[3 : 26] Or when we lose a loved one or are left alone, it can appear as though God is no longer working for our good. Or when we are waiting for employment or some other need, it can appear as though God no longer provides.

Or when we are suffering health issues ourselves, it can appear as though God no longer cares. In fact, I was visiting someone from our church last Friday who's struggling with significant health issues.

And then to add insult to injury, the doctor said that she's likely to have to have her feet amputated. Now, when we hear that, it really does appear like God no longer cares, doesn't it?

And whether it's the apparent attractiveness of the world or the apparent failure of God, these appearances can be deceiving. And they can deceive us into doubting God or faltering in faith.

And today, we continue our series, as I said, in Genesis, in the life of Abram or Abraham, as he's later renamed. And today, we'll see Abram return to faith after he faltered last week.

[4 : 33] And we'll also see him commit to trusting in God despite appearances. So I take it our author's purpose for us today is to, when faith falters, to return to faith and to keep trusting and living by faith rather than by sight.

But because last week follows, sorry, this week follows on very closely from last week, let me remind you of what we've seen so far. So last week in chapter 12, we saw God make four big promises to Abram.

Does anyone remember? No, I don't either. So slide, we'll go to slide, next slide. It's the acronym GLOB. So there was great name, land, offspring, nation, and blessing.

And I said last week that the great name, the first one was really only for Abram. And so the Bible focuses and traces the last three, the LOB promises throughout the Bible. And as we heard in our second reading, Abram believed God's promises and went to a land he'd never seen before.

It was a great act of faith. But then came famine in the land, do you remember? And it appeared that he would die. And so instead of trusting God to provide, Abram feared for his life and fled to the land of Egypt.

[5 : 48] Then he feared the Egyptians who might kill him for his very beautiful wife, Sarai. And so Abram then lied and said she was his sister. Pharaoh heard of Sarai's stunning beauty and made Abram rich with a dowry and took Sarah to be his own wife.

And as I mentioned last week, Sarah was 65 years old at this point. Actually, when I got home from church last week, my wife told me that that was my perfect opportunity to say that in my eyes, at 65, she will be just as stunning as Sarai.

She was joking, of course, but just in case, my wife had seen... No, no, I'm sorry. Anyway, Abram basically sold his wife to save his life. But then remember, God intervened.

God sent Sarah back to Abram to keep the promise of offspring. And God sent Abram back to the land to keep the promise of land. And the author's purpose was to show us that God's promises are unstoppable.

Do you remember? For even when faith falters, God does not. And in light of those unstoppable promises, Abram this week now returns to faith in God.

[6 : 58] So at point one in your outlines and verse one in your Bibles. You'll need a Bible to follow along. So chapter 13, verse one. So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev with his wife and everything he had.

And Lot went with him. Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold. And then from the Negev, he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai, where his tent had been earlier and where he had first built an altar.

There he called on the name of the Lord. And so here Abram travels from Egypt to Bethel. And so the next slide is a map, but it's a bit hard to see. So it's on the back of your outlines.

You might like to turn your outline over and have a look there. In the bottom left-hand corner is the way to Egypt. So that's where Abram came up from. And then he went across towards the region of the Negev, which you can see on your maps.

And then he went north from place to place until Bethel. His great wealth of livestock meant it was a slow journey with lots of stops place to place, kind of like traveling with young kids, which I'm sure many of you have experienced.

[8 : 07] But why does he head back to Bethel? Well, because Bethel is the place where he really began his life of faith in the land. This is clearer with a more literal translation.

So the next slide, verse three and four is literally Abram traveled to the place where his tent had been at the beginning between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called upon the name of the Lord. Do you see how the author repeats the ideas of the place with beginning or first? And then at that place, he calls on the name of the Lord.

You see, this place is really where he began his life of faith in the land. In other words, returning to Bethel is symbolic for returning to faith in God.

But how do we know it's a real return? I mean, often people will apologize and try and return in right relationship and reconcile and so on. But sometimes the apology is fake.

[9 : 11] In fact, there's websites which tell you how to spot fake apologies. And I was reading through it and I went, oh, I've done that before. I've said to my wife, I'm sorry you misunderstood. That's not really a proper apology, is it?

So how do we know Abram's repentance and return to faith is real? Well, because our author shows us next a real response of faith. So point to verse five.

Now, Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, but the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were unable to stay together.

And quarreling arose between Abram's herders and Lot's. And now the Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time. Here it seems as though God's promise of land has failed again.

Last week it failed to produce food and so there was famine. This week it fails to support them both together. Of course, it's only an appearance of failure, isn't it?

[10:17] Because all they need to do is just spread out. After all, God had given them the whole land of Canaan. And that's exactly what Abram suggests. He believes God's promise so much so that he acts as though the whole land is his.

And he says to Lot, look, let's just spread out. Verse eight. So Abram said to Lot, let's not have any crawling between you and me or between your herders and mine for we are close relatives.

Is not the whole land before you? So let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right. If you go to the right, I will go to the left.

Now, at this stage, Abram and Lot are facing the Jordan River. And so if you've got your maps on the next slide, you need to turn it like that. So they're at Bethel and they're facing that way.

And so left means north and right means south. You need to remember that because Lot does neither in a moment. But you also need to realize that our authors reminded us there's Canaanites and Perizzites also living in the north and in the south.

[11:24] And yet, Abram acts as though the whole land is his. And so he says to Lot, let's just spread out. You see, Abram lives by faith, not by sight.

He trusts God's promise despite the appearance of all these other Canaanites and Perizzites living in the land. And Abram's response of faith is highlighted by Lot's response of sight.

He does the opposite. Have a look at verse 10. Lot looked around. There he is. He's looking with his eyes. And saw that the whole plain of the Jordan towards Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt.

This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out towards the east. The two men parted company.

Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. Now the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord.

[12:32] Do you notice what Lot does in verse 10? He lifts up his eyes and looks. He acts and chooses by sight. And he chooses not the north or the south, as Abram suggested, but he goes east.

He chose the green grass on the plain of the Jordan towards Zoar. Now if you look at your maps, so you'll have to turn over your outline. Have a notice where Zoar is.

It's just bottom right of the Dead Sea. That's not going to help them that way. No, we'll go back. So have a look at your maps on the back of your outline.

The border of the promised land was the Dead Sea. The eastern border, that's where it stopped. And the southern border, that's where it stopped. So Zoar is outside the promised land.

And while scholars are not completely sure where Sodom and Gomorrah were, since they were completely destroyed, they are pretty sure that they too were outside the borders of the promised land.

[13:34] They're probably outside the southern borders below the Dead Sea. And so you could say that Lot saw the grass was literally greener on the other side of the border.

And he chose to live there. You see, unlike Abram, Lot lived by sight, not by faith. And that is very dangerous because appearances can be deceiving, can't they?

And our author tells us this with all these ominous comments he makes. Now, I'm guessing you've all heard of that movie that flashed up, Jaws. You know the noise that it makes?

Let's see if we've got this sound working. Thanks, Mark. You've all heard this before? No, Philip has.

Anyone else? No, you've all heard it before. Thank you. That's seamless at the back. That's fantastic. When you hear that noise, you know danger is close, don't you? And it's the same here

with our author's comments.

[14:33] Notice all the ominous sounds that he makes in these verses. Verse 10, he mentions the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. And where is Lot going to live? Near Sodom.

Then in verse 11, he says, Lot moved eastward from Bethel when technically he's gone southeast. But in Genesis, every time someone moves east, they move away from God. So Adam and Eve in the garden, they left the garden via the east.

They went eastward away from God's presence. Cain in chapter 4, verse 16, goes eastward away from God's presence. Or the people in chapter 11, verse 2, move eastward to build the Tower of Babel in competition with God.

And so by moving east, our author is telling us that Lot is in danger of moving away from God and his promises. And in case the alarm bells are not ringing loud enough, our author says in verse 12 that Lot's location is different to Abram.

Abram stayed in the land, do you see? While Lot lived near Sodom, a city not in the promised land. And then the nail in the coffin comes in verse 13 where we're told that Sodom was sinning greatly against the Lord.

[15:44] Can you see how our author is sounding huge warning here? It's DEFCON 1. Why? Because he wants us to see how dangerous it is to live by sight and not by faith.

For appearances can be deceiving. They can even take us away from God. Instead, he wants us to live by faith. And to encourage us to do that, he then records God's response to Abram's faith.

So we're at point 3, verse 14. The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, Look around from where you are to the north and south, to the east and west.

All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.

Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land for I am giving it to you. So Abram went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron where he pitched his tents and there he built an altar to the Lord.

[16:52] Here we see that when faith returns, it is welcomed with God's promise. For God reaffirms his promises to Abram, doesn't he? And by doing so, God firstly seems to be saying that we're now reconciled.

You've returned to faith and I'm going to reaffirm my promise to you to show that the relationship's right, that I've returned to you too, Abram. Remember last week, Abram's faith faltered spectacularly.

And so this reaffirmation of his promises shows that God has restored him, returned to him. But second, God reaffirmed his promises to Abram to reassure him as well.

Did you notice how he says these promises with emphatic language? So he gives Abram some, he tells him to look as well and he says, don't just look at the land, but look at the north and south and east and west.

Did you notice that? How he lists all the compass directions. He even tells Abram to go on a property tour in verse 17. He says, go for a walk through the length and the breadth of the land. And then he says, I am giving this to your offspring forever.

[18:03] And then he even says, and the offspring will be like the dust of the earth. Have you ever tried to count dust on the ground before? I don't know why you ever would actually, but it's impossible, isn't it?

That's how offspring, how many offspring Abram will have. But you see how God reassures Abram by reaffirming his promises with emphatic language.

The point is, when faith returns, it is welcome with God's promises. And in doing so, God returns to Abram and he reassures Abram so that he might keep living by faith and not by sight.

Well, what about us? What does all this mean for us? Point four. Well, again, the author's purpose seems to be twofold, doesn't it? After showing us God's unstoppable promises last week, he now wants us to firstly return to faith when we falter, like Abram.

And secondly, to keep living by faith despite appearances. Of course, for us, faith is in Christ, isn't it? Christ is the one in whom all God's promises to us are found.

[19:12] Christ is the one who died to pay for our sins. Christ is the one who rose again as Lord. And Christ is the one who will bring us to the new creation, to our heavenly promised land.

And so, when we return to faith, we are to return to faith in Christ, whether it's for the first time or the umpteenth time. And when we do, we'll be welcomed with God's promises.

And so, for example, on the next slide, we read from John, keep going, John 3, 16. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

And so, if we turn to faith in Christ for the first time, if we believe in him, what are we welcomed with? The promise that we will not perish but have eternal life.

Or John 11 there, Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, who has faith in me, though he dies, yet will he live. Again, when we turn to faith in Christ for the first time, we'll be welcomed with the promise of life after death.

[20 : 23] And so, the question for us this morning, or the first one is, have you turned to faith in Christ? Do you believe in him? Because if you don't, then you won't have any of God's promises, only if it was good promises to you.

And for us, who have turned to Christ in faith for the first time, then we have to keep returning to Christ for the umpteenth time. For when we do, we too will be welcomed with God's promises.

Like these on the next slide, 1 John 1, if we confess our sins, that is, we return to Christ, that God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Or James 4, come near to God, return to God, and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.

I don't know how your relationship with Jesus is going at the moment. I don't know how your prayer life is going or how you're going at living by faith rather than by sight.

[21 : 28] But I do know that we all falter in the faith from time to time, don't we? We all sin from time to time. And if that's you at the moment, then do return to faith in Christ.

For when you do, you'll be welcomed with God's promises of forgiveness and restoration. So that's the first application, to return to faith, whether for the first time or the umpteenth time.

But the second application is then to keep living out our faith despite appearances. Or as Paul will say later, to live by faith and not by sight. In other words, we're to be an Abram, not a lot.

Because as we saw last week, God's promises are unstoppable. And in fact, we have even more reason to believe these promises than Abram.

You see, Abram saw God's unstoppable promises last week, didn't he? He saw how God returned Sarah to him to keep the promise of offspring. He saw how God returned him to the land to keep the promise of land.

[22 : 30] But we can see that God has kept his promises even more so in Christ. I know a retired minister who went through the Old Testament and he worked out that there's over 300 promises or prophecies talking about God's Messiah or God's King and that all of them, every single one of them is fulfilled in Christ.

And he said the probability of that happening in one person was 100 million billion. So a lot. Now, I didn't check his maths, but the point is for Christ to have fulfilled all these promises shows that God's promises are unstoppable.

He will keep them. And so we have even more reason to trust them and to keep living by faith rather than by sight. And so when the world's way appears to be better, when the grass looks greener on the other side, then do remember appearances can be deceiving and they can even take us away from God.

A friend of ours is coming down to visit in a little while and she's single, though would love to be married. And she's even had a man court her, be very interested in her and chase after her, but he's not a Christian.

Now, the world's way would say, well, who cares? It's all right as long as you love each other. And it appears to be easier that way, doesn't it? But she knows appearances can be deceiving, for she knows too many people who've been led away from God by their spouse.

[24 : 05] And she also knows God's way does lead to contentment in this life and a new creation in the next life where she'll never be lonely but enjoy an easy life for eternity.

And so, despite appearances, she continues to live by faith and not by sight. Or when we suffer and it feels like God no longer cares, like that lady I was visiting last Friday, then we have to remember that his promises are unstoppable.

For he's kept them in Christ and so we'll continue to keep them in Christ. In fact, when I was talking to this lady last Friday, we were talking about this and she said, look, she said a couple of things. The first thing she said is, I just keep remembering what Christ did for me at the cross. I can't believe he would do that for me, go through all that pain for me. And compared to that losing feet are nothing, she said.

And she tried to make light of it as well and she said, at least the pain in my feet, I won't feel it anymore. But we also talked about the fact that God promises us life in a new creation that will far outweigh any suffering in this creation where she'll get a new body with new feet.

[25 : 19] And in fact, I read with her a passage from 2 Corinthians and we'll finish here. So if you've got your Bibles there, you might like to turn to it. So 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 16. Watch this next as you can call conclusions after and do like to see the interpretation and come t up and see how are ■s on Mercy at portion of the that