

Faith: The Way to be Made Right

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[0 : 00] So I'm going to start with a question that's at the top of your handouts, and it's this. Can we trust God to keep his promises? And there's a double meaning to that question, because on one hand, can we trust God to keep his promises?

Are we trusting and believing in him as we ought to? But on the other hand, can we trust God to keep his promises? Is he able to deliver on his word?

Is he trustworthy and capable? And today we're going to explore the two sides of that same coin.

The coin are the unbelievable promises God makes to Abram in chapter 12.

So a great name, a land, offspring and blessing. G-L-O-B, GLOB, is the acronym we've been using. And if we were keeping score on God, how do you think he's going so far?

So there's a scorecard I've put at the top of your handout. Let's have a look. Let's see if God is a pass or a fail so far. So great name. It's one of the promises. Abram was wealthy now.

[1 : 11] He had a terrific military victory last week. But I think this promise is still far from complete. A land. We've identified the land, Canaan, but still no vacant possession.

No permanent peace. Warring nations all around. So not a really great mark there. Offspring. That one's easy. None at all. Bit of a fail. Blessings to the world.

Well, again, last week, Lot and the Sodomites were blessed because of Abram. But they hardly constitute the whole world. This promise is still really incomplete.

You see, God's promises are unbelievable. But at this stage, they are unbelievable. And so, can Abram trust God to keep his promises?

This is our first point. Let's pick up the action in verse 1. After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. Do not be afraid, Abram.

[2 : 13] I am your shield. Your very great reward. The word of the Lord coming to someone. That is Bible speak for an emphatic word from God.

You see, perhaps after Abram's military victory last week, perhaps he expected some sort of retaliation. And God says, don't be afraid. I am your shield.

Your very great reward. And notice here that God is taking all the initiative in the relationship.

Abram hasn't spoken or done anything so far.

God's word comes out of the blue. Very similar to chapter 12, when God first introduced himself to Abram and just started promising all these blessings on him.

And we're not sure why God does this. Why he befriends Abram. Why he chooses to bless him. It just seems within God's nature to bless in an undeserved way.

[3 : 13] Here, near the very beginning of the Bible. We're only 15 chapters into the whole Bible. We get a foundational picture of God. He is gracious.

Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield. Your very great reward. Here is the promise of blessings for no other reason. It just seems God can't help himself.

It's just within his nature to bless in an undeserved way. And so can Abram trust God to keep his promises? Abram is the great hero of faith in the Bible.

But in Genesis 15, we get a very different picture. Verse 2. Have a look down at verse 2. Abram said, Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless?

And the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus. And Abram said, You have given me no children. So a servant in my household will be my heir.

[4 : 13] These first words of the model man are honest words. I'm finding it very hard to believe you, Lord. I can't see a son, nor all the other blessings.

All I can see is this foreigner in my household. Eliezer, he will be my heir, no doubt. Can Abram trust? I think he needs some reassurance.

And so graciously, graciously, the Lord underlines his promise again. Verse 4. Then the word of the Lord came to him. There's that emphatic word again.

He says, This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir. And it's not as though God had a quick look at his own scorecard and thought, Oh, wow, I really better start trying now.

Rather, he's giving his friend a comforting, reassuring word. God says, Don't worry, Abram. I will deliver you. And so again, to reassure him, verse 5.

[5 : 16] He took him outside and said, Look up at the sky and count the stars, if indeed you can count them. Then he said to him, So shall your offspring be.

In chapter 13, a couple of weeks ago, the illustration was the dust of the earth. You know, those Dyson vacuum cleaners. How much dust can a Dyson pick up?

If you can count the dust in there, that's a lot of children. Imagine the dust in the whole world. But this time in chapter 15, it is the stars of the sky. And the illustration, I don't think it really works very well in Melbourne.

So go outside, count the stars. How many children will you have? None. Once, for a bit of shameless name dropping, once I took a Bible study group to the mountains in Wales.

And there was a meteor shower. Billions of stars and stars going on. It was incredible. Equally, I used to go down to Wilson's Prom down on the south coast to go camping.

[6 : 13] On a clear night, billions of stars. I imagine you guys have all been places where you see an amazing amount of stars, usually out of the cities. Incredible.

God says to his friend Abram, Go on, have a go. See if you can count them all. So shall your offspring be. You see, struggling to have children is a really big problem for many people.

How much more stressful if your family was supposed to give birth to God's promised nation. And in verse 4 and 5, Abram is struggling to believe.

But all he gets is a word from the Lord. And that is enough to reassure him. Because we're told in verse 6, Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Maybe Abram believed so blindly and so well that God said, Well done, Abram. Your faith has achieved the right amount of whatever.

[7 : 21] You've got enough brownie points to be righteous or to be right with me, to be my friend. Your faith has done it all. You've got the brownie points.

But it's not that Abram's faith was good enough and then God blessed him. Remember, God blessed him already. God took the initiative in their relationship.

God's blessings are not a reward for the right quantity of faith or quality of faith. They're the gift received by faith.

God declared Abram righteous because whatever flimsy faith he had, he put it all in the God who would do it all.

Therefore, faith merely receives or accepts what God graciously gives. So if I can illustrate with my hands, imagine working hands.

[8 : 19] So imagine my hands are working. Faith is not working hands, working to achieve God's friendship and righteousness. Faith is open hands, receiving what God has already done, trusting that he will do it all.

Working hands versus receiving hands. It is not the strength of your faith that saves you or blesses you. It is the object of your faith who does it all.

We are saved by grace alone. God initiates the relationship. He does everything. We get it all for free through faith alone.

We trust in God to do it all. On the screen is our second reading. This was from Romans chapter 4. Here are a few key verses. And this makes it very clear for us.

Verse 3. What does scripture say? Abram believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation.

[9 : 26] The illustration here is of workers and wages. So last year I was working at Woolies in Box Hill just to pay my way in life, I suppose. And I used to do the Monday morning 6 a.m. shift in the milk fridges.

Hours and hours inside a fridge at 6 a.m. It redefines the concept of I hate Mondays. But anyway. Now, if my boss had said to me, Vijay, I'm going to do you a favour.

I'm going to give you a little present. Here is your \$70 wages. When I say it like that, it hardly seems, 70 bucks hardly seems worth it. Anyway, if my boss had said, Here, I'm going to do you a favour.

Here is your wages. I would say, No, mate. Sorry. I earned them. You are doing me no favours here. You owe me that cash.

Put it in my frostbitten hands, I would say. You see, a worker can rightfully demand wages. The boss is obliged.

[10:31] That's the language there. The boss is obliged to pay them. But a person cannot demand righteousness or a friendship with God in the same way.

It's his gift to give. And verse 5 on the screen. Verse 5 says, You see, if you're poor and you want cash, you work hard and you earn it.

That's verse 4. If you're ungodly and you want a restored relationship with God, you don't do anything. You simply trust God to do it all.

That's verse 5. Let me paraphrase verse 5. And that is Abram.

Abram is an ungodly man. Like you and like me. Abram has done nothing for God. Like you. Like me. But he trusts God to bless him.

[11:52] He takes him at his word. And this is really important because this is here in chapter 15. Before Abram really becomes the huge hero of faith that God declares him righteous.

Can Abram trust? He doesn't have a brilliant faith. He needs assurance all the way. But he takes God at his word.

He believes God will do 100% of the work. And God counts this to him as righteousness. But what about the other side of the coin?

This is our second point. Can Abram trust God to keep his promise? And again this is an important question because God's scorecard looks pretty bleak.

You see if you were going to start a new nation in a million years. You'd never pick a patch of dirt occupied by warring tribes. You'd pick a beautiful South Pacific island where they don't have ice on the windshield when you get up in the morning.

[12:58] Did you have that this morning? I had that this morning. You'd pick a South Pacific island far away from everyone else. It's beautiful sunny climate pineapples and coconuts. But even more than that you would never start a nation with a couple who are in their 70s who can't have children anyway.

Not only are God's promises unbelievable. At this stage they are unbelievable. See God has made it near impossible to keep his promises.

And so he underlines them again in verse 7. He also said to him, to Abram, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession.

As always, Abram still needs more assurance. In verse 8 he says, Sovereign Lord, how can I know? How can I know that I will gain possession of the land?

It's a really honest picture of Abram. He really isn't perfect. And so God reassures him in verse 9 with this bronze age ritual.

[14:09] And again, it's not as though God was going to really start trying now. He was always going to bless from the first word in Genesis 12. But he reassures his friend in a way his friend, in a way Abram can understand.

So verse 9. So the Lord said to him, Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.

Not a young person. Sorry. Young pigeon. Pardon me. Excuse me. Pardon me. Is that Freudian? I'm not sure.

Abram brought all these to him. He cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other. The birds, however, he did not cut in half. You see, this was an ancient ritual for making a covenant. On 5th of April 2013, I made a covenant publicly. I got married to my wife, Rachel. There were no heifers or goats involved. Just a lot of in-laws.

[15:12] She's not here. That's fine. Today, today we have paper contracts. That's how we sign. We have paper contracts. In the ancient world, you'd cut animals in half.

And the way you sign on the dotted line is you would walk through the pieces. And the point was, if I break my word, if I break this covenant, do to me as we have done to these animals, as we cut them in half.

There's a quote from Jeremiah on your handouts to show that. As for the man who transgressed my covenant, I will make him like the calf that they cut into and pass between the pieces.

If you break your word, they cut you in half. And I actually think this is probably a really good way of doing things, actually. If we still made contracts like this, there'd be far less need for lawyers.

Apologies to the lawyers in the room. And the terms of the contract, they're spelled out in verses 13 to 16. Let me read them. Can Abram trust?

[16:40] Ask God to keep his promises. How in control of the future do you have to be to predict the next 400 years?

Clearly, God is talking about the events of Moses and the Exodus to come. Would you stake your life on where Australia and China will be in 400 years time?

Will you stake your life on what the European Union would look like in 400 years? Would you stake your life on where your family will be in 400 years?

Here again, God is showing that only he will be powerful enough to fulfill the terms of this covenant. And then here's the really interesting bit. Verse 17.

See, normally two people would walk through the pieces of the animal to ratify the contract.

[17:50] But here only God does. The smoking fire pot, the blazing torch, that's a symbol of God's presence. That's him signing on the dotted line.

God takes sole responsibility for the covenant. And where is Abram? Verse 12 tells us that he is in a deep sleep.

This ceremony, it underlines the things that we have been saying. That Abram has done nothing but stands to gain everything. That is grace.

He takes God at his word. He believes that he will do it all. That is faith. And God credits him or gifts him righteousness.

We are saved by grace alone through faith alone. And again, even though God formally signs this contract by walking through the pieces, it's not as though he's saying, okay, now I'm going to really start trying.

[18:53] He was going to keep his word regardless. But he does these things to reassure Abram with a visual sort of demonstration he can understand and believe in.

You see, his scorecard is so bleak at the stage. Abram needs assurance all the way through. He says in verse 2, what can you give me, Lord?

In verse 3, you've given me no children. In verse 8, how can I know? And so God says in verse 13, know for certain.

And in verse 18, the assurance of this physical contract. On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said to your descendants, I give this land.

Can God keep his promises? He is legally binding himself on pain of death. He stakes his life and his reputation, his very character on impossible events to show that he can be trusted.

[20:01] And so finally, for us, can we, in this room, can we trust God to keep his promises? You see, it might be these past few weeks as we've been talking about these promises, that they seem very remote to us.

To a person that we don't even recognize. You see, even if we know Abraham, we certainly don't recognize Abram. Promises of offspring in a land, to make his name great.

Good for him. What do I care about that? And the answer is that we are direct beneficiaries. Both us in this room and all the people on earth.

You see, in the New Testament, we're told that this was the gospel that was preached to Abram. Even thousands of years before Jesus had even arrived, Abram had the gospel.

That's Galatians 3, verse 8 and 9, if you're taking notes. That means that Jesus is not a new thing. Rather, Jesus is the climax of a gospel that began with Abram thousands of years earlier.

[21:13] Like his father, Jesus alone does everything. Through his gospel, a multitude of Abram's children will be born as the church grows.

Through his resurrection life, he ensures a promised land, or a new heavens and a new earth, if you like. And through Jesus' death, all people on earth will be blessed as they receive forgiveness and a restored right relationship with God, friendship with him.

We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone. But we can't fully grasp all these blessings in 2018.

Like our father, Abram, we're still having to wait by faith to receive him. Can we trust God to keep his promises? I wonder, if we were to complete God's scorecard today, this side of salvation history, how would you score him?

I think since the arrival of Jesus, he'd get a massive pass mark. It's true, we've got a much better vantage point, much more than Abram, to trust in the word of God.

[22 : 27] However, in spite of that, like Abram, sometimes our faith is flimsy. Often we still need reassurance at every step along the way.

Genesis 15 is a model for faithful people who still need assurance. Will there really be a new heavens and a new earth? Melbourne just seems to roll on year after year.

One disaster after another. How can I know, Lord? Know for certain that to you and your descendants, that is us, I will give a promised land.

Just take me at my word. Will there really be a multitude of offspring, that is Christians? It doesn't look like there are many left in Melbourne. Certainly not in my neighbourhood or workplace.

How can I know, Lord? Know for certain, he says. More than the stars in the sky. Millions and billions of Christians down through the ages.

[23 : 30] Just take me at my word. And if that's not enough, he strengthens his promise by sending Jesus to bring it all about.

For people like us, we are saved and blessed by grace alone. Because God does everything and we do nothing. Through faith alone, we simply take God at his word.

We know for certain he will do what he says. And then he will count or declare or gift us with righteousness and friendship with him.

And so let's pray. Father, we declare as one people that we are saved by grace alone. That you do everything and we do nothing. Through our faith alone, we trust you to do it all.

We receive everything you have done. All the blessings that you give us. Father, help us when it's hard to know for certain. Thank you that you comfort us by your word.

[24 : 31] Please, would you reassure us of this? Please help us look to Jesus, your ultimate word. To know for sure in his name.

Amen.