

Faith: The Way to be Made Right

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[0 : 00] Let me start today by asking a question which is at the top of your handouts. And this is the question. Can we trust God to keep his promises? Can we trust God to keep his promises?

And there's a double meaning here 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 to do what he says he will do?

Is he trustworthy and capable? We're going to explore these two sides to the same coin. And the coin is the unbelievable promises made to Abram.

And so great name, a land, offspring and a blessing. We've been using the acronym GLOB this past few weeks. And if you're keeping score, if we were keeping score on God, how was he going so far?

[1 : 03] And so I put a scorecard at the top of your handout. Is God a pass or a fail so far? Great name. Let's have a look. Great name. Well, Abram was wealthy now.

He had a really good victory last week. But I think this promise is still far from complete. Maybe a half out of 10 there. A land.

He's identified a land, but still no vacant possession. It's full of other nations. So no good there. Offspring. That one's easy. None at all. It's a fail there.

Blessings to the whole world. Last week, again, we saw that Lot and the Sodomites were blessed because of Abram. But that hardly constitutes the whole world.

So again, still very incomplete. God's promises are unbelievable. But at this stage, they are unbelievable. And so can Abram trust God to keep his promises?

[2 : 03] This is our first point. And let's pick up the action. Verse 1. After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield.

Your very great reward. The word of the Lord. That is Bible speak for an emphatic word from God. Perhaps Abram expected military retaliation after the victories last week.

God says, do not 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. It's very similar to chapter 12 when out of the blue, God just chooses Abraham. He decides to bless him.

Here, we're only 15 chapters into the whole Bible. We're still learning who God is. And here it seems that God is gracious. Do not be afraid, Abram.

[3 : 07] I am your shield. Your very great reward. Here is a promise of blessings. And for no other reason than it seems it's just within God's nature to bless.

God is gracious. And so can Abram trust God to keep his promises? Abram is the great hero of faith in the Bible. But here in chapter 15, we get a very different perspective.

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. Now, these first words of the model man, they're honest words, actually. I'm finding it hard to believe, he says.

I can't see a son or an heir. All I can see is this foreigner, Eliezer of Damascus, in my house. I can't see any of the blessings that you have promised.

[4 : 10] Can Abram trust? It seems he needs some reassurance along the way. And so graciously, the Lord underlines his promise again. Verse 4.

Then the word of the Lord came to Abram. There's that emphatic word from God 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 has checked his scorecard and thought, wow, I really better start trying here. He's giving his friend a comforting word instead.

He says, don't worry, Abram, I will deliver. And again, to reassure him, verse 5. He took him outside and said, look up the sky and count the stars. If indeed you can count them.

Then he said, so shall your offspring be. In chapter 13, the illustration is of the dust of the earth. If you can count that up. This time it's the stars in the sky.

[5 : 09] Unfortunately, this illustration doesn't really work very well in Melbourne. So if you go outside in Melbourne, you look up, you count the stars. How many offspring will you have? None whatsoever. 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 they're all going all over the place. It was fantastic. Incredible stuff. Equally, sometimes I go to Wilson's prom. On a clear night, billions of stars.

Really incredible stuff. I wonder if you've been to a place where you've just got a spectacular view on a clear night. It's really something. God says to his friend, Abram, go on, have a go.

See if you can count the stars. Even if you can count them, so shall your offspring be. And struggling to have children is a really big problem for people today, as I guess it's always been. But how much more stressful if from your family, God was supposed to start a new nation. You see, in verse 4 and 5, Abram is struggling to believe.

[6 : 20] But all he gets is a word from the Lord. But that is enough. That is enough to reassure him. Because in verse 6 we're told, Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Maybe Abram believed God so blindly that God said, well done, Abram. You've done enough on the faith meter.

You've earned the right amount of brownie points to be righteous or to be my friend. But it's not that Abram's faith was good enough and then God decided to bless him.

Remember, God chose him first. He took the initiative in the relationship. And so God's blessings are not a reward for the right quantity or right quality of faith.

Rather, they're a gift to be received by faith. God declared Abram righteous because whatever flimsy faith he had, he had put it all in the God who was going to do everything.

[7 : 26] And therefore, faith merely accepts or receives what God has already done. So if I can illustrate this with my hands. So imagine working hands. Imagine my hands are working.

Working hands like this. Faith is not working hands like this. Faith is open hands that receive. Faith doesn't work hard to get blessings.

Faith merely opens its hands to receive the blessings God has already given. It is not the strength of your faith that saves you.

It is the object of your faith that saves you. We are saved by grace alone. God initiates a relationship. He gives all these blessings for free.

We are saved through faith alone. We trust in God who will do it all. And our second reading from Romans makes this really clear. It's on the screen now. So I've just put some of the key verses.

[8 : 24] So verse 3, what does the 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.

And so the illustration here is workers and wages. So last year I used to work at Woolies and I used to do the Monday morning 6am shift. And at that time I used to have to go into the milk fridges just to fill the milk for a few hours.

And I'll tell you, hours and hours inside a fridge at 6am, it kind of redefines the concept of I hate Mondays. But anyway. Now if my boss had said to me at the end of the week, Vijay, I'm going to do you a favour.

I'm going to give you a present. Here is your \$70 wages. And when I say it like that, it hardly seems worth it, 70 bucks. But anyway. If my boss had said, I'm going to do you a favour.

I'm going to give you a gift. Here is a present. Here is your wages. I would say, no mate, sorry. I earned them. You owe them to me. Put that cash in my frostbitten hands, I would say.

[9 : 34] You see, a worker can rightfully demand wages. The boss is obliged. That's the language. The boss is obliged to pay them. But a person cannot demand righteousness or friendship with God the same way.

Verse 5. To the one who does not work, but trusts God, who justifies the ungodly. Their faith is credited as righteousness. See, if you're poor, if you're poor and you need cash, go out and work and earn the money.

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

That's verse 5. And so if I can paraphrase verse 5 because it's quite dense. Here it is. Ungodly people do nothing to help their relationship with God, but trust him alone to do everything to bridge the divide or to give them a right standing.

And that is Abram. Thanks. That's Abram. Abram is an ungodly person like you and like me. Abram has done nothing for God like you and like me.

[10:47] But he trusts God to bless him. And it's here in chapter 15 of the Bible before he becomes this huge hero of faith that God declares him righteous.

Can Abram trust God to keep his promises? He doesn't have a brilliant faith so far. He needs assurance at every stage, but he takes God at his word.

He believed God will do 100% of the work. And so God counts this as righteous. But what about the other side of the coin?

Can Abram trust God to keep his promises? This is our second point. And this is an important question because if you were going to start a nation in a million years, you'd never use a patch of dirt filled with sort of other tribes.

You'd definitely use a South Pacific island. Millions of miles away from everyone else. Beautiful climate. No ice on your windshield in the morning. No split system heaters either.

[11:56] But even more than that, you'd never begin a nation with a couple who are in their 70s who can't conceive anyway. You see, not only are God's promises unbelievable, they are unbelievable.

He's made it near impossible to fulfill his words. And so he underlines his promises again in verse 7. Have a look down verse 7.

He also said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it. As always, Abram still needs more assurance even after verse 7.

In verse 8, he says, Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of the land? It's a really honest picture of Abram. He really isn't that great, is he?

Pramila spoke about the fickleness of people and about the greatness of God. It's so true. And God reassures him in verse 9 with this bronze-aged ritual.

[13:01] And again, it's not that God is going to start trying now. He wasn't trying before. He's going to start trying now. He was always going to fulfill his word right from the first time.

But he reassures Abram in a way Abram will understand. So verse 9. The Lord said to him, Bring me a heifer and a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon. Sorry, young pigeon. Accident. Pardon me. Verse 10. Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two, and arranged the halves opposite each other.

The birds, however, he did not cut in half, nor did he cut any people in half. Just to clarify. What is going on here? This is an ancient ritual for making a covenant.

Making a covenant. So I made a covenant on the 5th of April, 2013, when I married Rachel over there. We got married. There were no heifers or goats at the time, just lots of in-laws.

[14:07] But anyway, cheeky. Today we have paper contracts. In the ancient world, you would cut animals in half. And the way you sign on the dotted line is, you would walk through these pieces.

And the point was, if I break my covenant, do to me as we've done to these animals. There's a quote from Jeremiah on the screen, which shows this. And actually, I quite think this is a good way of doing things, actually.

If we still make contracts like this, there'd be far less need for lawyers anymore. Anyway, the terms of the contract, they're spelled out in verse 13 to 16.

Let me read. Then the Lord said to him, know for certain that for 400 years, your descendants will be strangers in a country, not their own, and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there.

But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves. And afterwards, they will come out with great possessions. You have, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age.

[15:11] In the fourth generation, your descendants will come back here for the sin of the Amorites has not reached its full measure. Can Abram trust God to keep his promises?

Clearly, God is predicting Moses and the Exodus story. How in control of the future would you have to be to predict 400 years ahead, to stake your life on it?

Would you stake your life on where Australia and China and the US would be in 400 years? Would you stake your life on where the European Union will be in 400 years?

Will you stake your life on where your family will be in 400 years? Here, God is showing that only he is powerful enough to fulfill this covenant.

And then comes the really interesting bit, verse 17. When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

[16:11] On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, to your descendants, I give this land. You see, normally two people, two people walk through the contract to or walk through the pieces to ratify the contract.

But here, only God does. That's the smoking fire pot and the blazing torch symbolizes God's presence. That means God is taking sole responsibility for this covenant.

Where is Abram? Verse 12 tells us that he is in a deep sleep. And that means that this ceremony has underlined everything we have said.

Abraham has done nothing, yet stands to gain everything. That is grace. He takes God at his word. He believes God will do it all.

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

[17:19] He was always trying. But he's just doing this so his friend Abram will have assurance so he can believe. You see, God's scorecard is so bleak at this stage that Abram needs assurance along the way.

So verse 2, what can you give me, Lord? Verse 3, you have given me no children. Over the page, verse 8, how can I know, Lord? And so God says in verse 13, know for certain.

Know for certain. And again 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? Well here God legally binds himself on the pain of death. He stakes his reputation and his life and his whole character on his faithfulness to his word to Abram to show he can be trusted.

And so finally for us, can we trust God to keep his promises? This is our last point. And what I was thinking this week is all this talk this past few weeks about promises and blessings and things like that, it seems very remote to us here in 2018 in Australia.

[18:45] To a person we don't even recognise. You see, even if we know Abraham, we certainly don't recognise Abram here in this verse.

Promises of offspring and a land and blessings, well good on him. Why do I care about that? And the answer is that we are direct beneficiaries of the promises, both us in this room and all the families on earth.

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

It's in Galatians chapter 3 if you're writing notes. That means that Jesus is not a new thing, but rather the climax of a gospel which God began thousands of years before in Abram.

Like his father, Jesus does everything. Through his gospel, a multitude of Abram's offspring will be born as the church grows. Jesus' resurrection life ensures a promised land, a new heavens and a new earth, in fact.

[20:01] And through Jesus' death, all people on earth will be blessed as we experience his forgiveness and a right standing, a right relationship with God again.

We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, and now in Christ alone. We can't fully grasp all these promises yet.

Like our father, Abram, we'll have to wait by faith. Can we trust? God to keep his promises? If we were to complete the scorecard now in 2018, this side of salvation, how would you score God today?

I imagine you give him massive, massive pass marks because of the arrival of Jesus. And it's true, we've got a much better vantage point of history, a better look at things than Abram had from his point of view.

However, in spite of it all, like our father, Abram, we still waver in our faith. Our faith is not perfect. We still need assurance all the time.

[21 : 09] We still need God's word to underline the promises again. Genesis 15 is a model for people of faith who still need more assurance.

Will there really be a new heavens and a new earth? Doesn't Melbourne just keep rolling on and on? Doesn't the world just keep turning one disaster after another? How can we know, Lord? God says, know for certain that to you and your descendants, to us, I will give a promised land. Just take me at my word, he says.

Will there really be a multitude of offspring, of Christians? There doesn't seem to be many of us left anymore. Churches are combining rather than expanding. There are barely any Christians in my neighbourhood, none in my workplace.

Will there really be a multitude of offspring? How can I know, Lord? And God says, know for sure more than the stars in the sky, millions and billions of Christians down through the ages.

[22 : 16] Just take me at my word. And if that's not enough, he strengthens his promise with another word, with the Lord Jesus himself to bring it all about for people like us.

We are saved by grace alone because God does everything and we do nothing. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone. We simply take God at his word.

We know for certain he will do as he says and he counts that to us as righteousness or friends with him. We are saved with him. We are saved with him. We are saved with him.