

Faith in God's Promises

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[0 : 0 0] In what ways are we tempted to doubt God? Since we started this series in Genesis from chapter 12, the message all along has been one big message the whole way through, and it's this, to trust in God.

So trust God to bless. Trust God in spite of appearances. Trust God in spite of the odds. Last week we added a nuance, don't distrust God.

And today we're going to add another nuance, which is don't doubt him. In what ways are we tempted to doubt God? Last week we left Abram and Sarai, and they were 86 and 76 years of age, and still no promised offspring, which is one of God's promises to them.

So they took matters into their own hands. Remember that Sarai took Hagar, her maidservant, and they had a baby through surrogacy, little Ishmael.

And if impatience was the problem last week in chapter 16, this week impossibility is the problem, because our chapter opens some 13 years later.

[1 : 1 2] In verse 1 we're told that Abram is now 99 years old. God's promises were hard to believe, but this week they are flat out impossible.

And so here is a passage to come back to when God's promises seem impossible, and we're tempted to doubt. You see, we're increasingly being asked to trust in people.

Trust politicians. I doubt it. Trust the banks. I doubt it. Trust other churches. I doubt it. Trust other people and our culture.

I doubt it. What about this? We can throw God into that mix. God is real. His son Jesus came to die for your sins. He rose again from the grave.

I doubt it. This passage encourages us not to doubt God any longer. And here's the thing.

[2 : 1 7] When you're reading the Bible, just for yourselves, when you're reading the Bible, you're supposed to find the one big idea. But today I found the one big letter. It's the letter D. And you'll see that as we go along.

And so please keep your handouts with you and your Bibles open. We're at point number one. Let me read from verse one. When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am God Almighty.

Walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers. And the key to understanding chapter 17 of Genesis is in the language at the end of verse one.

End of verse one says, walk before me faithfully and be blameless. That's the similar language that God uses when he's talking about Noah, just a few chapters earlier.

So on the screen, please shoot, and I've highlighted or underlined the same words. This is God's verdict on Noah. You see, the author is linking us back to good old Noah.

[3 : 2 2] Just as God began a whole new nation through Noah, so too he will begin a whole new nation through Abram. And his offspring, God is determined, there's a D word, God is determined to start again.

You see, only 17, thanks, Suzanne, only 17 chapters into the whole Bible, we've had a couple of false starts already. So Adam and Eve in chapter two, they were supposed to be fruitful and multiply.

That ended badly in chapter three. Noah was supposed to be fruitful and multiply. That ended badly in chapter 11. And so when we get to Abram, we find the similar language of Noah.

We find the language of being fruitful in verse six. And we have to ask whether his nation will be another false start, like Adam and Noah.

And I guess that's what Abram and Sarah have been asking all along since we've met them. But things have gotten worse in chapter 17. 13 years have passed.

[4 : 28] They are now 99 and 89 years of age, respectively. And I'm not sure how people aged back then. It's always, you know, lots of funny ages.

But I'm not sure. Can people have children that old? I went to the internet to find out. And this is always, don't do this. But I went to the internet to see what is the oldest couple that have ever had children.

And one website says 72, a lady who was 72 and her husband had a child. Who could be bothered really at that age? I'm only 41 and I can't be bothered doing it again.

Another report said 52. So who's to say, but 99 and 89, can a couple that old have children? I doubt it.

Will this be another false start? It seems that God is determined. There's a D word. God is determined to have a people for himself.

[5 : 31] This determination is reflected by the way he changes Abram's name. Verse five. No longer will you be called Abram. Your name will be Abraham.

For I've made you the father of many nations. This determination is reflected in the way God blows open the scale of these promises. And I've put a table on your handout, which can show how big those promises have become.

We won't go through all. And let's just have a look at a couple of those differences now. So previously in verse in chapter 12, God said to Abram, I will make you a great nation. But today in chapter 17, verse six, he says, I will make nations, a plural of you.

So previously, Abram was given a great name. But today we see that Abram was to have a royal dynasty. He says in verse six that kings will come from you.

If you flick to the very beginning of the New Testament, don't do it now. But if you did, the very beginning of the New Testament is Matthew's gospel. And it starts with a genealogy that goes from Abram to King David to King Jesus, the Christ.

[6 : 42] Clearly Abram's household is no mere house of Windsor. Previously, God established his covenant with Abram.

But now verse seven, it says, I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants. Another D word after you for the generations to come.

Previously, Abram was given the land of Canaan. But in verse eight, now the whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give you as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you.

You see, it's no wonder that three of the four big religions of the world all try and stake their claim to be the children of Abram or Abraham, children of the promised blessings of God.

And it's clear from this passage that as the impossibility increases, so too does the scale of what God offers.

[7 : 46] As the doubt steps up, so too does God's determination. But I think the heart or the center of God's blessings is there in verse seven.

Verse seven, he says, I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant. He goes on to say, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

Again, at the end of verse eight, to you and your descendants after you, I will be their God. See, underneath all God's blessings seems to be his true desire.

There's a D word. To be their God, to have a relationship with his people. This desire, it runs right throughout the whole of the Bible.

And so on the screen, I won't go through all of them, but just the last one, Ezekiel 37, my dwelling place, there's a D word, my dwelling place will be with them.

[8 : 43] I will be their God and they will be my people. Thanks, Sujen. And this desire, it's quoted many times throughout the New Testament, but supremely at the very end of the Bible in Revelation, which was our second reading.

So it's on the screen. Look at the language again. I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, look, God's dwelling place is now among the people. He will dwell with them.

They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. I wonder how our doubt stacks up against God's determination.

It's very persuasive, isn't it? When you see the whole of scripture moving towards God, dwelling, having this relationship with people. In spite of impossibility, in spite of false starts, God is determined.

So much so that he does, another D word, he does it all himself. And this is our second point. I wonder if you've ever let children help you with a job.

[9:51] Do you do that? Do you let them help you with the cooking or the cleaning? Or maybe it's in the garden like me, or let my son help pump petrol in the car, which I realize I'm not allowed to do.

So I hope this is not being recorded. But you know that when you let children help you do a job, you know that you've got to, you sort of do it with gritted teeth, don't you? Because you know you've just got to do it all again.

Well, I think that's what God is doing here. You see, he let his children have a go at helping him with the world. So he commanded Adam, be fruitful, but their offspring were sinners.

He commanded Noah, be fruitful, but Noah's offspring were sinners. And so I think in verse six, God steps in and says, look, I will do it. He says, I will make you very fruitful.

And you can see this sort of do-it-yourself attitude in our passage. Thirteen times, I wonder if you spotted it. Thirteen times is the phrase, I will. I will make you fruitful.

[10:55] I will make nations of you. I will establish my covenant. I will be their God. And so on. I will do it, says God. Don't doubt. Take me at my word, he says.

But here's the thing I find really interesting. It's not just that God alone will do it. It's more like only God will do it. Only God can do it.

You see, if Abraham and Sarah having a baby at 86 and 76 last week is hard to believe, this week it's impossible. It's laughably impossible.

But God has deliberately, D word, God has deliberately allowed another 13 years to pass. It is now laughably impossible. Look at verse 17.

Abraham fell face down. He laughed and said to himself, will a son be born to a man who's now 100 years old?

[11:56] Will Sarah bear a child at the age of 90? And his doubt seems well placed, doesn't it? He thinks God should cut his losses and just carry on the covenant through Ishmael.

In verse 18, he says, Abraham said to God, if only Ishmael might live under your blessings. You see, at least Ishmael is alive and real. At least he's right here. At least through Ishmael, there's a chance of carrying on some kind of dynasty.

You see, having a baby at their age is impossible by human standards. The promised land, Canaan, filled with warring tribes, permanent and vacant possession, impossible by human standards.

A royal line, how can you promise that? Everlasting blessings to your descendants, how can you promise that to anyone? I will send my son who will die for your sins, who will rise from the grave, impossible by human standards.

God deliberately makes this covenant impossible to show that only he can do it. Back in verse 1, he introduced himself.

[13:13] He says, I am God Almighty. And the footnote there says that that is, I am El Shaddai. As far as we know, that name means, I am the God of the mountains.

Impossible promises? That's fine. Because here is a God who even made the mountains. He can deliver on his word. Children at 99 years of age, don't doubt.

God Almighty will do it all. And actually, this should give us reassurance. You see, it's so much better that God takes the responsibility out of our hands.

Adam and Eve, sinners. Noah, great start, but a sinner. Abram and Sarah, or Abraham and Sarah, total mixed bag so far.

You and me, sinners. It's so much better. It's a relief that God's covenant is not in our human hands to stuff it up and give it another false start.

[14:17] God is determined. God will do it all. And so he gives us signs so we won't doubt. And this is our last point.

Another thing that's really prominent in this chapter is circumcision. And if you don't know what circumcision is, I'm deputizing my friend Guy Manuel here. He is happy to tell you what it is.

It's over to you. If you need to know, ask Guy. I'm not going to tell you. Have a look at verse 9. Then God said to Abraham, as for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you, for the generations to come.

This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you. The covenant you are to keep, every male among you shall be circumcised. And it's important to be clear that Abraham is not earning God's blessings through obeying circumcision.

God already made the covenant in previous chapters. We know that. But in verse 11, God says that circumcision is just a sign. So he says, you are to undergo circumcision and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.

[15 : 30] So rather than circumcision making the covenant, it's just a sign that a relationship exists between him and God. To help illustrate, this is my wedding ring, which is hard to get off, which is probably good, but anyway.

My wedding ring, there it is there, it functions in the same way. So this ring is a sign to me and to my wife and to all of you that I'm married. It's a sign of the relationship I'm in.

The ring doesn't make the relationship or the covenant. That covenant was made with public promises and pieces of paper back on the 5th of April, 2013.

That's when we did that, five years ago. But the ring is just a permanent sign to everyone of the relationship status that I'm in. There was a wedding here yesterday and you'll remember the liturgy in a wedding.

It says, I give you this ring as a symbol or a sign of our marriage. It's a sign of the covenant that we're in. Actually, God's covenants have always had a sign.

[16 : 36] So Noah, his sign was the rainbow. Moses, the sign was the law. David, the sign was the throne. For Jesus, the sign is baptism.

But circumcision is a little bit trickier because circumcision isn't a big public sign like a rainbow or my wedding ring. It's private. It's personal in nature.

And so it's there only for Abraham and Sarah to remind them when they're tempted to doubt God's ability to give them an offspring.

Circumcision doesn't make the covenant. It's just a sign of God's determination of what he wants to do. And just as God permanently changed Abraham's name, he permanently changes his flesh. Halfway through verse 13. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. In this way, Abraham is always carrying around a permanent reminder of God's promises to make him fruitful when he's tempted to doubt.

[17 : 46] Think of the wedding rings again. So last night I had a friend's 40th birthday. It was at a pub in the city. And actually the pub was called Saints and Sinners which is tricky.

But anyway, what if I went into that pub and before I go in what if I take off my wedding ring and I put it in my pocket so I can go hang out in a public bar? What sign am I making?

What am I saying about my willingness to be in a relationship with Rachel, my wife? It's not a very good one, is it? But, sorry, have a look in verse 23 at Abraham's willingness.

Verse 23. On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household and circumcised them as God told him.

Look again in verse 26. Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that very day. And I wonder if this is what, or this is part of what makes Abraham the great hero of faith we meet in the New Testament.

[18 : 56] You see, Abraham had no promised son, even at 99. Abraham has no idea who Jesus is. He's not like us. We have the benefit of the passage of time.

We can look back and see God working through thousands of years. We can look back and see Jesus' death and resurrection and the promised Holy Spirit. Abraham had none of that and yet he didn't hesitate.

On that very day he carries out this painful and personal religious ritual. And I wonder if that's what makes him part of one of the great heroes of faith.

And it seems therefore that in the face of doubt all you need is the right sign. In the face of doubt all you need is the right sign.

And in a way that's right. That's kind of right. But the tricky thing about this passage is figuring out circumcision for us today. Because traditional or classic circumcision is not the right answer.

[19 : 58] There's nothing wrong with circumcision per se. It's just that human hearts are dull. That's another D word. And so the Old Testament always looks forward to a better circumcision.

And there's some verses on the screen to help. So Deuteronomy 10, circumcise your hearts therefore and do not be stiff-necked or dull in heart.

Jeremiah says circumcise yourselves to the Lord, circumcise your hearts. The New Testament also agrees on the next slide. Romans at the top says no, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly and circumcision is circumcision of the heart by the spirit not by the written code.

You see, for us Christians, for us Christians, we live in a very different age to Abraham. We are under the bigger covenant through Jesus. Our sign is baptism.

Baptism is an outward sign of an inward heart circumcision by the Holy Spirit. And you can see in the Galatians passage there, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything.

[21 : 13] This is why we don't circumcise children these days. What counts is the new creation. You see, if you're a Christian, if you've put your trust in Jesus, Jesus will deal with our sin.

He deals with all the false starts of humanity. He makes us a whole new person. He makes us a whole new creation, starting in the heart.

His spirit circumcises or cuts away our fleshy, sinful selves. trust. This has already begun when we first put our trust in Jesus.

And in a way, that is better than a sign. It's more like a guarantee or a down payment on God's promises, in spite of how impossible they seem.

And I think this is really important for us, because we are so tempted to be like Abraham and Sarah, up and down, full of doubt. You see, we doubt God because of appearances.

[22 : 20] It seems like there aren't many Christians anymore. It seems like sometimes people aren't really maturing in their faith. We doubt God because of the odds. There aren't many good churches these days.

Christian morality is so obviously being attacked in our culture. The odds are against us. We doubt God because he seems to take forever to answer our prayers.

We doubt him because he works to his own timetable. And we doubt God's goodness because often life is rubbish. God is determined to be in a relationship with sinful me, to take me to his new creation.

I doubt it. It just seems impossible. We need to come back to Genesis 17. God is a secret sign in the flesh, so in the secret places of your heart, the Holy Spirit is cutting away your sinful fleshy selves.

Just as God made Abraham and Sarah totally new people, so the Holy Spirit is making us a totally new creation on the inside out.

[23 : 38] The Holy Spirit is more than a sign. He is a guarantee. He is doing it all. He's making us ready for a new creation where the promises of Abraham and Jesus will be finally fulfilled.

It has already begun, and so we need not doubt. Let me finish with verse 7. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants at Holy Trinity. after you for the generations to come to be your God and the God of your descendants at Holy Trinity after you. So let me pray. Father God, we are so tempted to doubt the blessings you promise us of forgiveness, a new life with you in the new creation.

These promises seem impossible when we look out at this culture with our eyes. Help us not to doubt. thank you for your spirit that is already making us a new creation from our hearts outwardly. Father, when we are tempted to doubt, please help us be reminded of the work of your spirit, that he is doing it all. We thank you that you are so determined to have people even like us.

[24 : 56] In Jesus' name. Amen.