

Believing Promises

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 13th of August 2000 the preacher is Leroy Coote his sermon is entitled Believing Promises and is from Genesis chapter 15 verses 1 to 18 Let's pray Dear Heavenly Father we thank you for the great word you give us in the Bible we thank you that it's had such a great impact on our lives please speak to us today through your word please soften our hearts so that we can absorb what you have to say through us today we pray this in your son's name Amen Please be seated and if you could keep Genesis chapter 15 open it would be extremely helpful so I'll be referring to it quite a lot during our time together but all of us have at some time made some promises either to family or friends but do we keep them?

In other words, do we keep our word? Parents I'm sure there has been many a time where you have made promises to your children but for some specific reason of which they are innumerable you've been unable to keep that promise Another classic is New Year's resolutions and we know plenty of people who tried to make them and we promise to change some aspect of our life usually health-related something like getting fit getting up in the morning running every day etc. etc.

Something I don't do but a couple of weeks later these have gone by the wayside never to be remembered until next New Year's Eve During the week a certain football coach who shall remain nameless but team will remain unidentified only for the fact that they wore orange a couple of weeks ago spent the whole week talking about the passion of their players promising that his players would be playing with lots of passion The end result they got flogged by 125 points yesterday and if you're an incident supporter I don't want to see you afterwards Another one SOCOG that brilliant masterpiece of organisation north of the border promised that this brilliant ticketing system for the Olympic Games would be foolproof Unfortunately for them it proved an unmitigated disaster

Would you believe the words of SOCOG? One more promise which was made in the mid 80s It was made by the Prime Minister of the time and I don't think he's one he'll ever live down because he said by 1990 no child in Australia will live in poverty Are there children in poverty today?

Did Bob keep his word? After all these examples it begs me to wonder is there anyone who keeps his word and actually does what he says?

[3 : 4 0] Such a person does exist and that's God In Genesis 15 God makes many promises to Abram but one key point is this when he says they will happen they do happen In other words when God speaks God delivers But to put a bit of background into chapter 15 let me describe very briefly what Abraham's story has been so far The Lord told Abram to go to the land that he had promised him God also promised that he would make him a great nation God promised this land to Abram's offspring but he doesn't have any yet Then a famine entered the land and instead of staying in the land that God gave him he went to Egypt the enemy so that he and his family could eat Abram then left Egypt with plenty of livestock silver and gold in chapter 13

And then the Lord showed him how much land he was going to get as shown by chapter 13 verses 14 and 15 And the key line in that was Raise your eyes now God saying to Abram and look to the place where you are northward and southward and eastward and westward For all the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever Then there was the battle in chapter 14 we heard about last week from Paul where Abram rescued his nephew Lot and wouldn't take anything from Sodom At this point in our story Abraham is somewhere between 75 and 86 And at that point we come to chapter 15 which starts with these words After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision Do not be afraid Abram I am your shield

Your reward shall be very great God is telling Abram here to trust him But why?

Because firstly God is his shield A shield as we know is used to protect the person from the enemy's weapons It has battle significance It has battle significance because the shield will protect Abram from the enemies of God And not only that it strengthens a link back to chapter 14 which is predominantly a battle scene But who's this shield going to be?

This shield is going to be God In other words God is going to put himself on the line to protect Abram And this works in a similar way nowadays with the way the Holy Spirit works in our lives to protect us from straying from him keeping us focused on the path that God has planned for us But secondly God is also described to Abram as your very great reward The reward refers to the soldier's booty of chapter 14 But the key here is not the fact that it is the reward but it's the adjectives describing it as a very great reward We don't know yet what that will be but we can safely assume that it will be bigger than the soldier's booty and we'll find out later about this very great reward and what it is

[7 : 25] So Abram's heard these words from God in verse 1 But is he really convinced by them? Does he trust God at this point?

How does Abram respond to this great promise? Well let's have a look at verses 2 and 3 But Abram said O Lord God what will you give me?

For I continue childless and the heir of my house is Eleazar of Damascus And then he says You've given me no offspring so a slave born in my house is to be my heir It doesn't sound like Abram's convinced about what God's saying does it?

He's saying Lord you promised me offspring Where are they? I'm around the 80 mark How long do I have to wait? The issue here is nothing to do with Abram's ability to have children but it has a lot to do with who inherits the land when he dies In the times when this was written if the husband died his estate would be left to the firstborn son because of the patriarchal nature of the society back then But if he didn't have a son then the head slave would get the land Abram's complaint is governed by his impatience in wondering when God is going to deliver Not if not how not why but when Aren't we guilty of the when factor when we're praying to God?

Sometimes we wonder when our prayers are going to get answered let alone how So how does God respond to Abram's impatience?

[9 : 23] Well let's look at verse 4 God's response to him was This man shall not be your heir No one but your very own issue shall be your heir Verse 4 is a reassurance to Abram that he will provide for him provide him with his own heir but also assures him that Eliezer will not get the possession of the land if he dies But the magnitude of this promise that God has made in verse 4 becomes exceedingly clear in verse 5 It reads Look towards the heavens and count the stars that is if you're able to count them Then he said to them So shall your descendants be In this verse God is putting specifics on the promise that he made to Abram in chapter 12 verse 7 which reads To your offspring I will give this land Not only that this point here is the great reward that Abram was promised in verse 1

But again getting back to what Abram's thinking I wonder what's going through his mind at this point You're kidding aren't you God this many descendants Or is it Wow Gee thanks God I'm going to get all these descendants but how are you going to give them to me But what's Abram's response to this He believes the Lord He's blown away by the promise that God's given him He believes in the Lord And what's the result of his belief Is that the Lord credited his belief to him as righteousness This verse is significant not just here but in other parts of the Bible And significant here because Abram at last believed that God was going to keep his promise It's a huge turning point in the life of

Abram because his belief in God has gone up in intensity But this belief is not the half hearted belief of oh yeah I believe you Lord and your belief ends up having no impact on your life It's like the common response in most people in the street and sadly there are some people in church who have that belief but luckily most of us have a belief that is like Abraham's which is a wholehearted transforming yes Lord I believe you I want to follow you type of belief and this is shown by the fact that he trusts wholeheartedly in the promise that God just gave him it's a response that a lot of us are familiar with it's a response like the commitment of one person wanting to follow Christ that one makes when they first become a Christian there's a genuine belief in the promise that God makes and as a response to this there is a complete life change from ignoring God to following

God totally each of us here who have that wholehearted belief in God have their own particular story just to give you a brief snippet of mine which some of you may have heard already that before I was a Christian I was a foul-mouthed ignorant person of God but now God turned me around to be one who follows him and he's almost got rid of the foul-mouthed bit the occasional bit don't drive in the car with me when I'm by myself the tape recorder would be frightening sometimes but verse 6 is mentioned by Paul in Romans 4 and says that for Abraham this meant believing in God's promise sorry faith for Abraham meant believing in God's promise but also it was an attitude for

Abraham that provided a base for his future acts of obedience all the way through until his death for any Christian worth their salt it is a solid wholehearted belief in God that should undergird what we do in our lives how we know what to do is not by our own personal instincts of God saying yeah do that now but through the word of the Lord which we have in our Bibles and which Abraham believes because that's what came to him as shown in verse 1 but what's the result of this belief it's the result is the Lord reckoned his belief to him as righteousness righteousness in the Old Testament means right action in God's eyes this right action was his faithfulness to the promise that God gave him of many descendants in other words because he wholeheartedly believed and now trusted

[14 : 45] God Abraham was considered righteous in God's eyes what's the depth of your belief in God as Christians we're delivered as righteous in God's eyes is your belief as deep as Abraham's how deeply do you believe the many promises that God has given you would your faith credit you as righteous Abraham believed he believed through faith he trusted God would come through his promises come through with his promise and responded in faith we know many people who we're praying for to respond in faith please let me encourage you to keep praying because it will happen do we believe through faith back to

Abraham's thinking he's getting all these people but now he's got another dilemma where's he going to put them but God addresses this problem by turning Abraham's attention to the promise of the land which is the other half of the great reward verse 7 introduces us to the fact that the land is now the primary focus of this next section and it reads the Lord says to Abraham I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess this verse is a reminder that it's God who has taken Abraham and family to the promised land and no one else it's God who's going to make Abraham father of all the earth he's told him that there are going to be many descendants for him but also God is going to give them their own land Abraham believes that he is going to acquire the land but inquires of the

Lord how he's going to how is he how he's to know that he's going to possess it in verse 8 the Lord's reply in verse 9 is absolutely fascinating 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 now like yourselves and I'm sure Abraham was probably wondering his question to God was why on earth do you want me to get these animals together especially these ones but despite the bizarre request true to his new found faithfulness Abraham was obedient as shown by his response in verse 10 but he actually got all these animals and then cut them in two and laid each of them over each other but he did not cut the birds in two

I suspect that this part here is a prelude to the sacrificial system in the Old Testament where animals were sacrificed for particular things for thanks for sins for praise etc etc or even for celebration but despite the type of ritual here the important fact is Abraham's obedience to God so this ritual is all set up ready to go but look what happens in verse 11 birds of prey come down on the carcasses and Abraham drives them away this is a symbol of Abraham driving away the attackers of God's people given that the animals placed on the ground were placed there at God's request Abraham here is keen to protect the ritual he has done on behalf of

God and it's important in another way because it's an indication of Abraham's increased zealousness towards God because he's now concerned with the affairs of God let me explain that further well in the first part of the passage verses 1 to 3 Abraham was concerned with his own things at this point such as who was going to get the land when he died Abraham was also concerned with whether he would get any offspring or not so he was in effect concerned about himself but now Abraham is concerned with the things that God has laid down for him to do and he's eager to protect the things of God regardless of the personal cost to him those birds of prey could have taken Abraham out of the picture by attacking him but they didn't Abraham put himself on the line knowing that in his mind God was going to be his shield and protect him as he protected his offering to the

[20 : 08] Lord verse 11 is clear evidence that Abraham's trusting God has gone to that deeper level I was talking about earlier that is the transition that is the effect of the transition from thinking about the things of yourself as opposed to the things of God your mind is focused away from yourself but now you're now focused on God and what he has for you and this is an indication of what is happening this episode here was apparently happening around sunset because verse 12 tells us the sun was going down but all of a sudden a deep sleep falls upon Abraham and a deep terrifying darkness descended upon him this is frightening if you imagine yourself in the situation you've just driven away some birds not budgerigars but birds of prey from the items the Lord wants you to get for him then as the sun was setting you fall into a deep very very deep sleep so deep that a terrifying darkness falls upon you but this deep sleep has a purpose deep sleep throughout the

Bible usually indicates that God is wanting to speak to one of his people and he does so here in verses 13 to 16 where he says to Abraham know this know this for certain that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs and shall be slaves there and they shall be oppressed for 400 years but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve and afterwards they shall come out with great possessions as for yourself you shall go to our ancestors 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 there was a reason for the darkness to be identified as terrifying first of all what God says is definitely going to happen simply by the words know this for certain and what is Abraham being told that will happen that your offspring shall be aliens the ones that he doesn't have yet shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs not my offspring he's probably thinking in his deep sleep but God you promised me that my offspring will have this land

God says to him however Abraham I didn't tell you what would happen to them until now they will be slaves there and they shall be oppressed for 400 years now being stuck in slavery for 400 years that's horrendous that's huge you've given me these descendants God but why are you doing this what have we done to deserve it the reality is the events described in verse 13 actually happen they symbolise the exodus and the time of Abraham's descendants in the wilderness before they have entered the promised land and what we have here is one of four very quick occurrences in these four verses of the theme when God speaks he delivers but Abraham can take heart because in verse 14

God tells us that he will bring judgment on the nation that they will serve and afterwards they will come out with great possessions their oppression is going to be hard but their reward will be even greater their reward the promised land the nation judged Egypt again a case of when God speaks he delivers then in verse 15 a dead set tragedy for Abraham he's told that he will not enter the land but will be buried in ripe old age after he's been with his ancestors in peace his burial fulfilled in Genesis 25 he died aged 175 again when God speaks he delivers however his descendants will come back to the promised land in the fourth generation which time wise matches up with the 400 years of oppression in verse 13 because each generation in those times generally equaled 100 years which back then was a lifetime but this fourth generation will only come in verse 16 when the iniquity of the Amorites is complete the Amorites are the inhabitants of the land that God was going to give to the descendants of Abraham at this time the iniquity or sin has yet to be done but the consequence of that sin is the

Israelites conquest of their land in the book of Joshua a clearer description of the iniquity of the Amorites comes in Leviticus 18 verses 24 to 27 which more closely defines the sin of the Amorites but further shows how God intends to keep his promise to Abraham all because of Abraham's faithfulness this also proves the point that when God speaks he delivers God finishes speaking about the future history of the land and then goes on to seal the promises he's made to Abraham by using the animals that Abraham gathered the seal of this occurs in verse 17 which reads when the sun had gone down and it was dark a smoking fire pot and flaming torch passed between these pieces to put a little bit of background here smoke and fire are a symbol of the presence of God and the fact that it was passed between the animals is an indication that he was there with them watching over them and not intended in destroying with them this ritual is widely debated as to its significance and let me repeat the ritual again he's got these animals laid out in a particular way and then this smoking fire pot and a flaming torch no it definitely does not have any olympic labels attached to it is waved past and between these animals but the most logical explanation I found for this was this that the animals represented

[27 : 38] Israel God's chosen people and the ritual itself is designed to portray God as walking with his people because again of the smoke and fire being symbols of God's presence so as it was as the smoking fire pot and the God sent torch was passed between the piece the animal pieces it was a symbol of God's presence with the people of Israel and God's presence is further exemplified in the words of verse 18 where he says he makes because on that day of this ritual sacrifice he made a covenant with Abraham and the covenant went like this to your descendants yes descendants I will give this land again almost repeat of chapter 12 verse 7 to your descendants

I will give this land but he sealed it he signed it with this ritual to say that he's going to be with his people God is going to be with his people in this particular land and then in the rest of that passage up to 21 he describes the specifics of that land where that land is going to be where Abraham's descendants are going to be placed God has now detailed the promises he made to Abraham and he made them extremely specific it is a pattern that goes throughout the Bible that when God makes a promise it's specific and that promise does come true he promised a Messiah in Isaiah this is going to sound really tacky he promised a Messiah in Isaiah and it did come true in the form which was fulfilled when Jesus arrived he promised a Saviour that Saviour was Jesus but like this passage he's promised descendants but he's also promised land for his people not back then but now that land is the kingdom of heaven and a great description of that land comes in

Revelation 21 Christians will go to that land either when they die or when Christ returns and we can be sure Christ returns will return and why is that because it's been said throughout scripture and from the evidence in this passage it's very clear that when God speaks he delivers well God does speak and deliver he's more believable than SoCog Bob Hawke and people who make new year's resolutions why not believe in a God who has kept every promise he has made down through history I can't find an excuse not to but many have he's faithful to his people he has not broken one single promise he has made how are you going to respond to a

God that delivers in that fashion are you going to respond the way Abram did in verse 6 or are you going to respond the other way which is to turn your back on God let me phrase that another way do you want to be credited as righteous as Abraham was in verse 6 or do you want to have judgment brought upon you like the nation in verse 14 let me leave you to decide down you