

Fear and Faltering Faith

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[0 : 0 0] Father, thank you again for your word. I thank you that you continue to speak to us through it. And so we pray, Heavenly Father, that you'd give us ears to hear and minds to understand, but more than that, hearts that would live in light of it. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, in life, we can fear all sorts of things, can't we? For some, it's spiders. Who's got a fear of spiders? A couple of people brought out snakes, heights. For my brother, it's seaweed. He would not swim in the ocean if there was seaweed there.

For others, it's clowns, not because they've watched that silly horror movie, It. But there's actually a phobia about clowns now called coulrophobia.

And then, of course, there's other things in life that people fear which are even more serious. Things like unemployment or failure or even the fear of missing out.

In fact, the fear of missing out is now officially known as FOMO, F-O-M-O, fear of missing out. It's not very creative, but there it is. And, of course, then there's the fear of death.

[1 : 1 1] And yet for us as Christians, we can face other fears because of our faith, can't we? I remember hearing of one Christian couple who faced the fear of never being parents. They can't have children of their own.

And when they applied to adopt, the adoption agency found out they were Christians and denied their application. We can also fear the loss of friendship with people or even family members because we are Christian and hold different views to what they hold.

Or we can fear the loss of religion here in Australia. My understanding is the Australian government is now at the moment considering the Ruddick report on religious freedom. And just last month, the Australian Christian Lobby sent out a video about one university student who had a real fear of not getting a university degree because of his faith.

His name is Josh. I think it's from a South Australian university. Take a short look at this video clip. I've grown up in a Christian family and I've been raised with Christian values. And I was around about three or so when I first made the decision to follow Jesus.

Since then, it's just been a continuous journey of discovering more of who Jesus is. So it all started when I received an email to say that I'd been reported by a few students for student misconduct.

[2 : 3 1] And so the instance that had been reported was me just talking to a girl I've been friends with for the past year and a half. And so we were just talking about work and she was saying she was really stressed.

I asked if I could pray for her. She said, yeah, yeah. Something that she appreciated afterwards. She said, like, look, I don't agree with that. I'm an atheist personally, but thank you. I really appreciate the care.

But I was then told that I shouldn't be praying for students on campus. And that it's challenging their beliefs and that I shouldn't be doing that. I was pretty annoyed, pretty confused as to why that was the reason.

I was like, no way is that a fair reason to suspend me. I had been told that I needed to attend fortnightly counselling sessions to learn how to appropriately interact with my peers.

I was also told that if I stepped foot on campus again that I would be removed by security guards. So I was quite amazed by that, thinking, wow, I've simply spoken to someone and I'm now like a threat to the safety of other students.

[3 : 37] Now, the Australian Christian lobby actually helped Josh get reinstated. But the point is loss of freedom because of our faith is actually a growing fear.

And the temptation for some Christians is to then give into this fear and that it cause our faith to falter. Yet as we return to our series in Genesis this morning, we'll be encouraged not to fear nor let our faith falter because God's promises are unstoppable.

Let me say that again. We'll be encouraged not to fear nor to falter in our faith because God's promises to us are unstoppable. Now, our passage today picks up where we left off last year, but given most of us don't remember what we did last week, let alone last year, me included.

Let me spend some time reminding you about the story so far. So we're at point one in your outline. And Genesis began with creation, as you might remember. And on the next slide, God said in Genesis 131, or we read, God saw all that he made and it was very good.

But then you might remember it all went very bad, didn't it? Adam and Eve rejected God's rule and ate from the one tree they could not eat from among the hundreds. The serpent's temptation to eat from that one tree proved too great.

[4 : 59] Of course, unless we're too quick to judge, we couldn't have done any better. I mean, the moment someone gives you one rule, don't touch. What do we want to do? Touch. Yeah. And because Adam and Eve tried to be God, you know, deciding for themselves what was right and wrong, then sin entered the world.

And with it came curse. And so the ground was cursed, which is why work is hard. And most of you here this morning would much prefer another day off tomorrow than going to work. It's why natural so-called natural disasters take place because the ground is cursed.

Relationships were also cursed, which is why people fight with one another and why people rebel against God. But then came this promise of God in chapter three of Genesis, where he would send an offspring of Eve or a seed of Eve, a child who would crush the serpent's head.

So have a look on the next slide from chapter three, verse 15. God said to the serpent, you will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring or seed and hers.

He, this particular seed, singular, will crush your head and you will strike his heel. And so the author of Genesis begins to trace the descendants of Adam and Eve looking for this seed, this offspring, this child who would crush the serpent's head.

[6 : 21] Remove God's just curse for sin and restore God's desired blessing. And so that's why when we read the book of Genesis, the author divides it into sections based around this phrase about descendants or family lines.

And so on the next slide is this phrase that he often uses. He says, this is the account of so-and-so's family line. Because he's tracing family lines looking for this seed, you see.

Or literally, these are the generations of. He's tracing the generations looking for this offspring who will bring God's desired blessing to all people.

And so let's pick it up in your Bibles at chapter 11, verse 27. And you see this phrase right there. Chapter 11, verse 27. He says, this is the account of Terah's, notice, family line.

So this is where the story of Abram begins. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. Haran became the father of Lot. While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans in the land of his birth.

[7 : 28] And so we're gone from three siblings to two. And then 29, Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milcah and Iscah.

Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive. Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, and the wife of his son Abram.

And together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. And so you'll notice here that it starts off with the family line of Terah.

But very quickly, the focus goes to his three children. And very quickly from three to two. And then from two to one, Abram. And so from chapters 12 to 25, our author will focus on Abram or Abraham's story.

His name gets changed later. And he does this because it's through Abram that God promises to bring back his blessing. So have a look at chapter 12, verse 1 and see if you can work out what word is repeated quite a bit.

[8 : 40] The Lord had said to Abram, Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you. And whoever curses you, I will curse. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. I mean, there's a few words repeated there.

But what word is repeated lots? Bless, isn't it? God is going to bring blessing back to his creation after the fall. But he's going to do it or bring it through Abram and his descendants.

And so God makes four big promises to Abram, which is summarized on the next slide with the acronym GLOB. It's almost GLOB key, actually. It's a surname.

But GLOB. Sorry, I don't know why I said that. But anyway. So great name, land, offspring into a nation and blessing.

[9 : 39] But there's a space between, there's a little space between G and L because the Bible focuses just on the last three. Since those last three, Lob, are the ones that affect the future generations. The great name was just for Abraham alone.

But when I read verses one to three, you might have noticed some other repeated words there. The words, I will. Did you notice that?

I will show you. I will make. I will make. I will bless. You see, it's quite clear that God is the one who is going to do all this. And our passage today will highlight this.

But the point here is that the author now focuses on Abram because it's through Abram that God will send the seed who will crush the serpent's head and bring blessing to all peoples.

But how will Abram respond to these big promises? After all, we've just been told in chapter 11, verse 30, that his wife is childless and unable to conceive.

[10 : 41] So how can he become a great nation, you know, through having offspring if he hasn't even got one and can't have one? What's more, Abram has never been to this place or this land before.

He's never seen it before, which is why God has to show him. Yet he's been asked to move his whole household and life to this unknown place. I mean, if we're asked to move or relocate, we check it out first, don't we?

We Google it and go there and visit and the like. We see what schools there are, what the houses are like, what medical facilities and so on. Yet Abram is asked to trust God without seeing any of this.

And on top of all that, Abram doesn't even know God. Abram has actually been worshipping other gods until this point. And yet, verse 4, So Abram went as the Lord had told him.

And Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran.

[11 : 45] And they set out for the land of Canaan. And they arrived there. Abram travelled through the land as far as the side of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. And at that time, the Canaanites were in the land. The Lord appeared to Abram and said, To your offspring, I will give this land.

So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him. And from there, he went on towards the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent between Bethel on the west and Ai in the east. And there he built another altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.

You see, Abram trusts God's word and goes, doesn't he? Just like that. And so on the next slide is a map of his journey. In the middle, there's a big desert, which is why they take the long way around.

But bottom right hand corner is the city of Ur, which is where Abram lived. That was his hometown. And that's where we're told in Acts chapter 7 that God first appeared to Abram.

And so presumably, when God appeared to Abram, he persuaded his father, Terah, in chapter 11, verse 31, to set out for Canaan. But by the time they get to Haran at the top, his father, Terah, has had enough.

[12 : 52] And he says, that's it. We're going to settle here instead. But when his father, Terah, died, Abram was now free to keep trusting in God's promises, which he did. And so he traveled from Haran at the top down at the left there to the land of Canaan.

And the point is, this is a great act of faith in God's promises, isn't it? Especially because when Abram got there, there were other people living in the land. But he still believes God's promise that this land will be given to his offspring.

And so he builds an altar and calls on the name of the Lord in worship. You can see why Israel still holds up Abraham as a great hero of the faith, can't you?

In fact, more than 50% of the world's population today claim some link to Abraham. But then trouble strikes. And Abram is faced with the fear of death.

So I point to in your outline and verse 10 in your Bibles. Have a look there. Now, there was a famine in the land. And Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.

[14 : 03] Here, Abram fears for his life because of famine. And so he takes his wife, Sarai, and heads down to Egypt. Now, at first glance, this seems like a reasonable thing to do, doesn't it?

I mean, we're told that the famine is severe. But did you notice what or rather who is missing in verse 10? I mean, it's only two verses earlier and he was calling on the name of the Lord.

But when trouble strikes, verse 10, there's no calling on God to provide. Instead, there's just leaving the land. Now, maybe I'll be a bit too hard on poor old Abram.

But look at what he does next in verse 11. As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife, Sarai, I know that you are a beautiful. I know what a beautiful woman you are.

So when the Egyptians see you, they will say this is his wife. Then they will kill me, but will let you live. So say you are my sister so that I will be treated well for your sake.

[15 : 05] And my life will be spared because of you. So Abram fears death again, but this time not from famine, but from the Egyptians who might kill him for his very beautiful wife.

Now, Sarai must have been pretty stunning for Abram to have this fear. And she was. She was also, by the way, 65 years old at this point. Now, before we all start to wish we had her genetics, let me remind you that people did live longer.

And so 65 wasn't that old back then. In fact, it's still not old today, just to be clear. I'm moving on before I get myself in more trouble. At the point is, Abram fears death, doesn't he?

But instead of trusting God to keep him alive and fulfill his promises, Abram decides to tell a lie or a half truth, at least, because we are told in chapter 20 of Genesis that Sarai is his half sister.

And they had the same father, Terah, just different mothers. Yet she is still his wife. And so it is a half truth. And as you know, half truths are actually full lies, aren't they?

[16 : 20] What's more, when you tell a lie, you often get caught in it. Don't you? That's what happens to him. See verse 14? When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that Sarai was a very beautiful woman.

And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And she was taken into his palace. He treated Abram well for her sake. And Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants and camels.

You see, Sarai is so stunning that her beauty is quickly reported to Pharaoh. And now Abram's lie has really got him stuck.

But instead of saying, when the officials come to get Sarai, wait, stop, she's my wife. I was just kind of, you know, pulling the leg kind of thing. He says nothing, does he? He lets them take her and even profits in the process.

Pharaoh gives him a rich dowry for Sarai's hand in marriage. So instead of trusting God, Abram effectively sells his wife to save his life.

[17 : 30] So much for our hero of faith. In fact, Abram's actions here are actually a reversal of God's promises. So instead of staying in the land God promised, what does he do?

He leaves the land, goes to Egypt. Instead of becoming a great nation through his own offspring, what does he do? He gives his wife to another man. And so he won't have offspring.

And instead of bringing blessing to others as God promised, he brings curse. See verse 17. But the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife, Sarai.

The word diseases there is literally plagues, which reminds us of another Pharaoh and 10 plagues later on. But you see, instead of bringing blessing, Abram's actions bring cursing as God is forced to intervene.

Now, I take it that diseases or plagues affected everyone except for Sarai, which is probably how they realized it had to do with her. Then presumably they questioned her and she spilt the beans because Pharaoh then summons Abram.

[18 : 42] See verse 18. So Pharaoh summoned Abram. What have you done to me? He said, why didn't you tell me she was your wife? Why did you say she is my sister so that I took her to be my wife?

Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go. Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men and they sent him on his way with his wife and everything he had.

Now notice here that Pharaoh is ironically more moral than Abram. Pharaoh is morally outraged at what Abram has done. He is furious at being tricked into almost committing adultery.

While Abram, on the other hand, throughout all this process here is silent after his plan. In fact, in the face of these accusations, Abram is silent. Why?

Well, because he knows he's guilty. He's got no words he can say in his defense. Unless we think God was too harsh on Pharaoh, notice that Pharaoh himself does not blame God, does he?

[19 : 49] Who does Pharaoh blame? Abram, the right person. It was Abram's lies which instigated the plagues. And so not even Pharaoh thinks God was being too harsh.

In fact, the disease has not only got Pharaoh's attention, but probably prevented him from actually consummating the marriage, committing adultery. Either way, Abram's fear causes his faith to falter, doesn't it?

And almost reverse God's promises. Not only by leaving the land and then jeopardizing the offspring, but also by bringing cursing instead of blessing and making his name not great, but one of contempt.

As Pharaoh basically tells Abram, get lost. In fact, Abram's faltering faith would have succeeded in reversing God's promises, except for verse 17.

You see the first three words of verse 17? But the Lord. You see, God intervened to keep his promises. He intervened to send Abram back to the land.

[20 : 57] He intervened to ensure Sarai's offspring would be Abram's too. And to work through Abram to send the seed, the child who would crush the serpent's head and bring blessing for all.

But what does all this mean for us? Point three in your outline. Well, we need to ask why the author includes this account. What is his purpose? After all, it's a pretty unheroic episode of our hero, isn't it?

But I take it that's the author's purpose. To show us that even when the great man of faith falters, God will not. That even when the hero of the story acts to reverse the promises, God will intervene to keep his promises.

It's as though the author gives us an example to prove what God said at the beginning of chapter 12, that I will keep my promises. In other words, our author wants us to see that God's promises are unstoppable.

He will keep them. Even when faith falters for God does not. In fact, what happens here to Abram actually foreshadows what will happen to Israel.

[22 : 13] So just as famine sent Abram to Egypt, you might remember another famine sent Israel to Egypt. And just as a pharaoh took Sarah as his wife, so another pharaoh will take Israel as his slaves.

And just as God intervened with plagues to keep his promises, so he will intervene with 10 plagues to keep his promises. And just as Abram leaves Egypt rich with their wealth, so Israel will leave Egypt rich with their wealth in the story of the Exodus.

But it's not just the events that foreshadow Israel. It's also Abram's faltering faith that foreshadows Israel's. For Israel will time and time again falter in their faith.

From the 40 years in the desert to the book of Judges where God would, you know, the people would sin. God would punish them and he'd raise up a judge and the cycle would go. They'd sin again.

They'd falter in their faith again and again. To the kings of Israel, most of whom faltered in their faith. Time and time again, we'll see human flesh fail.

[23 : 18] But time and time again, we'll see God intervene to keep these promises to Abram. Until finally, he intervenes with his only son, who is the seed that crushes the serpent's head.

So have a look on the slide at Galatians chapter 3 verse 16. And the promises were spoken to Abram, says Paul. Paul's writing this letter. And to his seed. As scripture does not say, and to seeds, meaning many people, but and to your seed, meaning one person who is Christ.

See, God intervenes with his son, the promised seed, the descendant from Abram. And Christ came to crush Satan's head. To reverse the curse and restore God's blessings.

He did it at the cross. For Jesus's faith in his father did not falter. And he said he went willingly to the cross to pay for our sin. And in doing so, he defeated Satan.

And so no longer can Satan accuse us of deserving death for our sins. Jesus has paid for them. Our slates are wiped clean. There's no accusation left. And no longer are we powerless to resist Satan's temptations.

[24 : 33] For through Christ, we have God's spirit who is stronger and prompts us through our conscience to resist. And no longer do we need to fear any spiritual curse like God's judgment.

Instead, we have every spiritual blessing in Christ now. And the assurance of every physical blessing later in the new creation.

But only if we trust in the promised seed who is Christ. And so have you put your trust in Jesus? Do you believe in him that he died for you and rose again?

Because without Christ, you will receive no blessing. No spiritual blessing now and no assurance of physical blessing later. And for us who do trust in Christ, then we have to remember that while people falter, God does not.

His promises are unstoppable for he has and will keep them. And that ought to encourage us to bank on those promises and keep our faith. Even the face of fear.

[25 : 37] Of course, in order to bank on those promises, we need to know them. I've talked to so many different Christians who are confused about what God does and does not promise us. For example, many Christians think God promises us health and wealth.

And I kind of think, what world are you living in? He doesn't, does he? But he does, however, promise us a whole stack of other things. I've listed just some of the promises on the back of your outline.

I've taken up the whole page and there's just a few of them. They're only from the New Testament. I haven't got to the Old Testament yet. But here are some promises. So if we are faced with the fear of not making it to heaven, then hear God's first set of promises.

You know, I who began a good work in you will carry it to completion. And when your faith falters, hear this next promise. I will keep you firm to the end.

Bank on those promises and let those promises that are unstoppable encourage you to keep the faith in the face of fear. Or on the next set, if we face the fear of failure in life, then hear God's promises that he will not let anything in all creation, even failure at work, to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[26 : 59] And see what great love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called the children of God. And so our self-worth does not depend on our earthly success.

It depends on being one of God's dearly loved children. Or when we face the fear of unemployment, then hear God's next set of promises that I will never leave you, never forsake you.

And do not worry because he will provide for your needs. Says Jesus in Matthew chapter 6. In fact, I know a number of men at our church who can attest to this one.

Who have faced the fear of unemployment and for some are still facing it. And yet they have not given in to that fear, nor let their faith falter.

Because they know God's unstoppable promises to never leave them nor forsake them. But to provide for their needs. Of course, I suspect some of them like us would wish God would hurry up about it.

[28 : 02] But nonetheless, they've not given in to that fear, nor let their faith falter. Or when we face the fear of death, hear God's next set of promises. Or this time from Christ, actually.

I will come back and take you to be with me. I will raise them up on the last day. I will transform our lowly bodies so that they'll be like his glorious body.

I conducted a funeral just last Friday of a lady who was 103 years old. Not bad, hey? But some of her final words were what encouraged me the most.

She had a faith in Christ. And one of her final words was, Heaven is waiting for me. See, she did not give in to the fear of death, nor let her faith falter.

For she knew God's promises were certain. Unstoppable. Or when we face the fear of suffering or loneliness or missing out on things in life.

[29 : 01] Whether it's a spouse or a job or something else. Then hear God's next lot of promises. That I will work in all things for the good of those who love him.

And that good is to be conformed to the image of his son. Or from Hebrews. Let us approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Or from 2 Corinthians. Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. One of my best friends, his wife, three weeks ago, also found out that she has cancer.

She's about Bex's age, actually. Her cancer is leukaemia, so blood cancer. And while she and we are very much praying that her treatment will work.

And while she would very, very much prefer to not leave her husband nor her three little boys. And miss seeing them grow up and get married and have children of their own and so on.

[30 : 10] While those possible fears of missing out are real. She's not given in to that fear. And she's not let her faith falter. Because she knows God's unstoppable promise to bring her to a glory that will far outweigh anything she misses out on.

And a glory where she will see them again as well. Or the last one. When we face the fear of persecution or losing our religious freedom or being kicked out of university like Josh was from the video.

Then hear God's declaration that he has made this Jesus both Lord and Christ. And then hear Christ's own promise that I will build my church.

Such that not even the gates of Hades or secularism shall stand against it. Or as we heard in our second reading. Therefore do not fear.

Do not be frightened. But set apart Christ as Lord. For God's promises to us are unstoppable. You see this passage in Genesis reminds us of God's declaration.

[31 : 21] I will. For even when the hero of faith falters God does not. Instead he intervenes to keep his promises. And if he has and will do that.

Then whatever fear we face. We can bank on his unstoppable promises. And keep our faith. Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father.

We thank you that you are a God who has and will keep his promises. And therefore they are unstoppable. Help us to bank on your promises.

So that when we face fears of various kinds in our lives. We would not give in to fear. Nor let our faith falter. But keep trusting in you.

We ask it in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[32 : 18] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.