

God is faithful

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, thank you. I think in a sense there's a very simple message at the end of this series! In the life of Jacob, from these verses, for us this morning, very, very simply and straightforwardly, God Almighty is faithful. He's a faithful God. In the midst of bitter sorrow and vile sin, and through the ups and downs of our lives, and even in our deaths, our God, God Almighty, is faithful. He's faithful to his promises. He is faithful to us. He will be with us.

He will not leave us. We can rely on him. We really can in our lives today. Okay. It has been two months of Sundays in the life of Jacob, Genesis 25 to 35, and after two months of it, we've come to the closing scenes of the Jacob story. This, I mean, what's it been? Dramatic, sordid, deceitful, violent saga, all of it, about a family. This saga about the family, chosen by God, through whom God promises to bless and save our world for good. By chapter 35, verse 9, where we just read from, all the big action has taken place, which we've heard about this past couple of months. Jacob, the one chosen by God to take forward his promises, deceived his brother Esau, stole his birthright, fled for his life. Do you remember that? He met the Lord beneath a stairway to heaven. He heard God's promises that all peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. He arrived at Uncle Laban's in Paddan Aram, and he was deceived into marrying two sisters.

He was entangled in Rachel and Leah's jealousy. He had 12 children by four women. He gained flocks and riches. He escaped Laban's clutches because God was with him. At the Jabbok stream, he wrestled with God, who wrenched Jacob's hip and then blessed him. And then, with Jacob reunited with his brother, and on the way home to his father Shechem, last week, took and raped his daughter. And with Jacob doing nothing, Dinah's brothers took bloody revenge and looted the city. By chapter 35 and verse 9, Jacob, with decades of deceit and struggle and tears behind him, and with his household around him, and his God with him, he's limping home. He's almost there. And in these closing scenes, this quiet little passage, seems to me that both Jacob himself then and we ourselves today should hear this truth, that God Almighty is faithful. He not only makes, but he keeps his promises.

And so, with decades of deceit and struggle and tears behind us, maybe, and in the midst of our bitter sorrows and vile sins, and through all our ups and downs, this grey March Sunday morning, God Almighty is faithful. He will be with his people. He will not leave us. We can rely on him.

Follow through the passage with me. I want us to notice, first of all, this morning, verses 9 to 15, if you've got it open, we should hear again God's promises. Hear God's promises one more time.

[3 : 3 8] Let me read. After Jacob returned from Paddan Aram, God appeared to him again and blessed him. God said to him, your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob. Your name will be Israel. So he named him Israel. And God said to him, I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you and kings will be among your descendants. The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I also give to you and I will give this land to your descendants after you.

Then God went up for him, from him, at the place where he talked with him. What do you make of that? I love this. I love that in verse 9, God appeared to Jacob again and blessed him. It's not the first time. All through Jacob's life, God had appeared and spoken and promised and blessed. And now he does it again. And very little of what God says here again is new.

Jacob's name changed from Jacob to Israel was back in chapter 32. But in appearing again and speaking again, I wonder if we're meant to know that God knows us. He knows how we forget. He knows how like we need things repeating. And he never tires of reassuring his servants and of giving us fresh confidence and certainty in the middle of hard-pressed lives.

In verse 11 onwards, what the Lord does is gather together all his long-term promises and he lays them out once more to his servant. Beginning verse 11 with this solemn statement, I am God

Almighty. Which is so significant. As someone has said, we do not live our lives in relationship with God Almighty. My pal, my buddy, my spiritual advisor, he is God Almighty.

His name, El Shaddai, speaks particularly of his great power and irresistible might. This the God who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth out of nothing with a word.

[6 : 03] This the God who sits enthroned in the heavens today, sustaining and ruling everything. He is God Almighty. No one can oppose him. No one can constrain him. He does as he pleases.

And so when this God makes a promise, you can be absolutely sure that no one and nothing can stop him from doing his, he says. And the promises themselves in verse 11 on may be familiar to some of us.

Yet they are stunning. Be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you and kings will be among your descendants.

So from Jacob promise will come a nation, the people of Israel. And from them, God promises a whole community of nations. He promises a massive, gathered, multinational church of people who belong to the God of Jacob.

I mean, that's a promise way back then. And kings will be among your descendants. There will be David and Solomon and others and ultimately Jesus Christ.

[7 : 20] God's final anointed king under whom this fruitful, growing, multinational community will enjoy God's blessings forever. In verse 12, God promises land.

The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I also give to you and I will give this land to your descendants after you. A promise that will find its final fulfillment in a heavenly country for all who belong to the descendant of Jacob, the Lord Jesus.

Jesus Christ. Just here, three and a half thousand years ago, in this moment, we're meant to hear again the ancient history-shaping promises of God Almighty.

Who, having appeared again to Jacob, then went up from him at the place where he talked with him. And so Jacob, verse 14, knowing how significant it is when God speaks and promises, set up a stone pillar at the place where God had talked with him and poured out a drink offering on it.

He poured oil on it and he called the place where God had talked with him Bethel. I'll remember this place. I'll remember your promises. I am yours. I worship you.

[8 : 36] At home, we talk from time to time in our family about wanting to be sure. Can we really know that God is there and is in control?

And sometimes we talk about that and wonder and worry a touch because, unlike for Jacob, the Lord God has not appeared in front of our eyes and spoken to us.

And we think if only he did. But reading these promises to Jacob, spoken here so long ago, should hearing these promises not grow in us fresh certainty and deepening confidence in our God?

It should. Because three and a half thousand years later, God has been keeping these promises. And we know he has because here we are.

This little Christian church in Orchard Park, three and a half thousand years later and halfway around the world from then when they were spoken to Jacob, we are part of these promises fulfilled.

[9 : 49] We are a little part of this long ago promise, now worldwide community of nations who follow King Jesus, the descendant of Jacob.

He promises. And through history, he does it. And so just straightforwardly, and it's so good to hold on to this.

Today, we don't live in an out of control world. And we don't live in a world with a distant God or a weak God. God Almighty makes promises.

And he really does keep them. And we so need to hear his promises laid out to us. Don't we? Again and again.

Most days. Every day. In a grey early March week. We need to hear his promises and know he's fulfilled them and trust in him.

[10 : 52] And that is because, secondly this morning, notice this in the text. We live out our lives under this promise-making God in the midst of sorrow and sin.

Which is verses 16 to 22. Because look, then Jacob and his household moved on from Bethel.

And while they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and had great difficulty. And as she was having great difficulty in childbirth, the midwife said to her, Don't despair.

in part you go, okay, that's fine, nice summary.

[17 : 12] Now I know who's who, but it's so much more than that. Because the names of these 12 sons trumpet to us that at the end of the day, when all is said and done, and you look back over decades of the whole painful family mess of Jacob and his wives and his concubines, God Almighty is acting faithfully. To Jacob's grandfather Abraham, years and years before, God had promised, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. That's a promise. To Jacob himself in chapter 28, same promise.

Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth and you will spread out to the west and the east, the north and the south, and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. As we've seen all the way through Genesis, it is God's all through history promise of a people. As stars in the sky, sand on the seashore, dust of the earth, great multitude of people that no one can count, who will together be forgiven by God and belong to God and blessed by him forever. God has promised. And here we are meant to see his faithfulness in the names of just 12 sons. Not yet as many as the stars in the sky, but 12 is more than one, one generation later. It can be hard sometimes to notice the faithfulness of God.

[19 : 04] Maybe because we're in the middle of noise and stress and arguments and issues to deal with and working out how to make you to the next weekend and so on. In our growth group gathering a couple of weeks ago, Lewis mentioned how good it should be to just stop a moment and think back over the past 10 years or 20 years or even a generation and consider what God has done.

He has helped me to this point. He stuck with me in my life. I remember how a friend became a Christian. I had a little hand in it, but it was all God working faithfully in that one man.

The Lord has grown his church. He's been at work here at St. John's. As people have come and joined us and grown and left for elsewhere and others have come and on it goes.

Stop and think. All around the world this past century, the gospel has been bearing fruit and growing. Underneath the noise and shout and news, God Almighty is working faithfully.

In and through the muck and deceit and sorrow and sin, he is faithful, our God. He is faithful, very finally, in both life and in death.

[20 : 35] We're almost there. Look, these last few verses finish things off. Jacob came home to his father Isaac in Mamre, near Kiriath Arba, that is Hebron, where Abraham and Isaac had stayed.

That's significant. In chapter 31, the Lord had said to Jacob, go back to the land of your fathers and your relatives and I will be with you. And now, finally, Jacob makes it home.

Because God had been with him all the way. Just as he had been with his father Isaac, whom we've heard so little of. Until now.

And Isaac's end. Which is told so solemnly, don't you think? Isaac lived 180 years.

And then he breathed his last and died. And was gathered to his people old and full of years. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

[21 : 37] Which just show us at the end of this section that our lives move on. Isaac, once a young boy.

Do you remember him going up the mountain with his father Abraham? Once a young boy. He now dies. Old and full of years. One generation replaces another.

Your grandparents die. Or they have died. The day comes when you bury your own parents. One day your children or others will bury you.

And yet even here, right at the close, you see God's faithfulness, don't you? Look, Isaac was gathered to his people. That is, rather than black nothingness for all eternity in the grave, God takes him and gathers him and reunites him with his people.

It's a beautiful little hint, a little word of the future beyond death that God in his faithful love holds out to every single one of us who will come to him.

[22 : 46] Because our lives pass. And someone close to us will organise our funeral. And for us who've put our faith in Jesus Christ and become part of this community of nations, our God will take us and gather us.

And he will reunite us with the people we belong to in the kingdom of heaven. He will. Early in his ministry, Jesus proclaimed in Matthew 8 verse 11, I say to you that many will come from the east and the west and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

Do you know that? Many of us.

Many of us.

Many of us. And we know God's faithfulness in both life and death. Would it be written on our hearts that he is with us and he will never leave us and he really will keep all his promises.

[24 : 48] And that is because he is El Shaddai. He is God Almighty, the creator of the heavens and the earth and the ruler of all and no one else and nothing can stop him. And when he has us in his hands, he has us for all eternity.

And so just like Jacob and just like Isaac, his people today, we who belong to Jesus Christ, we can rely on him. We really can. I'm going to lead us in a prayer.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together. It says in the New Testament. It says in the New Testament, the one who calls us is faithful and he will do it.

Our Lord and our God, we praise you for your unstopably wonderful promises and for your unchanging character.

Thank you that in these early chapters of Genesis, you set your love on Jacob. And in the midst of all sorts of vile sins and bitter sorrow, you kept him.

[26 : 02] You grew your people. You brought him home. And your promises rolled forward. Thank you that centuries later, one from Jacob, one from the tribe of Judah came, our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom all your promises find their yes and their fulfilment.

Thank you that now today you are building a community of nations, blessed and forgiven by you, belonging to your son.

And the gates of hell will not prevail against you or the work of your son. Thank you that in the midst of our lives today, with all their ups and downs and sorrows and sins, you are faithful and you will keep us until the day we take our place at the feast in the kingdom of heaven.

Make us those who bravely, weakly even, rely on you, our strong and faithful God. We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.