

God's Covenant

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[0 : 00] Emily, thank you very much and thank you Chris for inviting me this morning. It's a real joy to be here and preaching this morning.

! By word of introduction, many of you I think already know that I started training for ordination at St. Melitus. You may not have heard of St. Melitus, I've been told is how you're meant to pronounce it. He was the first Bishop of London back in 604 AD.

So you may or may not have heard of him. The college that I'm training at was not formed back then, it was formed in mid-2000s, 2007, and actually came out of Holy Trinity Brompton and some other colleges within the City of London.

And I'm in my first year of three there, so only just started and studying part-time. Before diving into our passage, let's just pray together.

Father God, take my words and speak through them. Take our minds and think through them. And take our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. Amen.

[1 : 16] Now if I were to take my wallet this morning, with all the phones and things that we have, I don't know how many of us still carry a wallet, and was to look inside it and see what notes I've got.

There is a £5, there's also, gosh, a £20 note there. I don't know if you know what's written on these old-fashioned things that we call notes, but on here it says that whoever it is promises to pay the bearer the sum of £20, or the sum of £5 or £10 or whatever it is.

So actually, what I'm carrying in my wallet is not actually £20. It's the promise that if I were to ever go to the bank and look to cash it in, I could get given £20.

So it's a promise for that money. Now today we're going to be continuing in the book of Genesis, and we're going to hear about another promise.

It's a promise that's even more secure than my £20. And why is it more secure? Well, because it's a covenant. A covenant between God and Abraham, between God and his people, between God and us.

[2 : 38] So this morning we've just got two points. You've got a little sheet, I think, with you. There's two points that we're looking at this morning. A promise of a people, and a land and a covenant.

So first of all, a promise of a people. Now it may be helpful to have your Bible open if you've got it there. Genesis 15. It starts with a vision, and a reassurance not to be afraid.

First one says, 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.

Now Abraham had just fought a battle, and just won a great victory back in chapter 15. So he could easily be afraid of the repercussions.

Maybe the people he'd been fighting could have come back to attack him. But God says, do not be afraid. Instead of being afraid, he might actually have become overconfident.

[3 : 47] He'd fought this battle, he'd won this battle. But again, God says, I am your shield. I am your shield. Again, I think, urging Abraham not to be overconfident.

And that's maybe a good place to start this morning, isn't it? With a message not to be afraid, and a message to know that God is our shield.

So when the arrows of the enemy come at us, in school, in work, at home, we have a shield in God. And we have a message from God not to be afraid. And then in verse 2, and I love this, Abraham is incredibly real when talking to God.

This is actually the first time that we see Abraham saying something to God. He says, Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless?

[4 : 52] You've given me no children. A servant in my household will be my heir. Now, it's not quite pantomime here, but in verse 4, we see God's reply.

So Abraham says, A servant will be my heir. He says, Oh no, he will not. And Abraham here shows that real honesty towards God.

Honest asking from Abraham. And we can do likewise. Yes, we're called to trust him. But the Psalms in particular are full of people being honest towards God.

They're praying real and honest prayers. And I think it's the same for us today. He wants us to talk to him, but to tell him how we feel, and to be honest with him.

And then we get this wonderfully vivid image, don't we? Go outside, look up into the sky, and count the stars to see how many your offspring will be.

[6 : 03] Now, I've been doing some research. Stars are not randomly placed. They're put into galaxies. You may remember this from being at school. Our galaxy is the Milky Way.

And it's estimated in the Milky Way there are 100,000 million stars. And the Milky Way, that galaxy, is one of millions and millions of galaxies.

Now, you get the picture here? The point is not to find an exact number. God is saying to Abraham, you will have many, many ancestors.

And we can begin to trace the Jewish line from Abraham to King David. And then from David to Christ. And then from Christ to us.

To all Gentiles and Jews who together have put their trust in God. So that's you and me. That's us. If we've put our trust in him.

[7 : 13] We are part of those millions and millions of stars. Exciting stuff. Matthew 1 verse 1 makes clear this is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

And then we get that long list that you'll remember that Abraham was the father of Isaac. And Isaac was the father of Jacob, etc. So how did Abraham react?

Seeing all those stars. Well, in verse 6, we see that he believed. And it was credited to him as righteousness.

So God made a seemingly impossible promise. And Abraham believed the Lord. God promises. We believe. And it can be credited to us as righteousness as well.

When we enter into that right relationship with a righteous God. Samuel, my son, knows how much I like Hebrews. There's a few verses in the book of Hebrews.

[8 : 24] Hebrews. I'm going to read them. Hebrews 11 verses 8 to 12 says, By faith, Abraham, when called to go to a place that he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

By faith, he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country. And by faith, even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.

And so from this one man, it says in Hebrews, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

So the story moves on. Again, God says who he is and what he's done. Again, a reminder to Abraham. Verse 7. I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.

I am the Lord that brought you out from a homeland and giving you a new land. And I want to just pause for a moment at that stage in the story to ask you how quickly you think these things happened.

[9 : 49] It's actually thought that there were 15 years between the promise of ancestors and the birth of Isaac.

15 years. We also read later in the passage about the Israelites being in Egypt as slaves. It's thought for 400 years. Remember the story of Joseph and of Jacob and the brothers and the endless making of bricks and building of houses for the Egyptians.

And even when they do escape with Moses, they then have 40 years wandering in the wilderness before entering the promised land. So 15 years, 400 years, 40 years.

And that's a lesson for us maybe, isn't it? How often do we pray and sometimes even feel that God has given us a promise, but then years and years of waiting.

It's hard, isn't it? There is a play, Waiting for Godot, by Samuel Beckett. I don't know if anyone's ever been to see it.

[11 : 01] Two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, stand by a tree waiting for the person Godot. Now, I hope I'm not spoiling the plot for anyone here, but Godot never arrives.

Beckett was said to be a genius, that he'd actually written a play where nothing happens. And yet you're glued to your seat. It's actually in two acts. There's act one and act two. Act two is very similar to act one. So actually, nothing happens twice. Now, in our case, it's not waiting for Godot. It does happen. After 15 years, Isaac is born. And after 400 years, the Israelites do leave Egypt. And after 40 years of wandering the wilderness, they do enter the promised land. And that brings me to my second point this morning, a land and a covenant. In verse 7, we read God saying, I will give you this land to take possession of it. [12:06] And Abraham again responds very honestly by saying, how can I know in verse 8? How can I know?

What assurance can I have? Now, instead of just giving a promise like he did earlier in the chapter, what happens now is God makes a covenant and in blood. We reach a rather gruesome part of the passage where Abraham is told to gather the animals, the heifer, the goat, the ram, to slice them in two, but not the birds. Covenants, they stay intact. What's being described here is an old fashioned covenant. God is making a covenant with Abraham. Now, covenant's not a word that we use very often today, is it? So I checked in the dictionary exactly what it means. First of all, it says it's an agreement. [13:09] So an agreement with Abraham. It's also far more than that. It's a lease. It's a deed. It's a legal contract. So this is serious stuff going on here.

Abraham's deep sleep in verse 12 gives us more details of what is to come. In verse 13, we see those 400 years and the mistreatment of the slaves and the exodus. And then the covenant is made. And God passes through the animals as a smoking fire pit and a blazing torch. Now, this is clearly meant to signify the presence of God. God often appears in the Bible as smoke and fire. Think of the burning bush as God appeared to Moses. Think of Exodus 19 and Mount Sinai that was filled with smoke as God descended. Think Revelation 15 and the sanctuary being filled with the smoke from the glory of God. [14:16] So, yes, this covenant is talking about physical land, but it's about so much more than that. This covenant was with Abraham to provide release and freedom.

And as God passes through those dead animals, he's saying, I should be as these dead animals if I break my covenant. He is swearing on his life that he will rescue his people. It's a solemn, one-way, grace-from-God commitment. And the book of Genesis is so foundational in our faith, isn't it? We see the story narrow from the first 11 chapters of Genesis, chapters 1 to 11. God created the world. Sin came into the world. Noah was saved from the flood. And now we focus in, as we are doing in these weeks, on one family and one man, Abraham. [15:29] And God gives a promise and he makes a covenant and we are to believe him. So we have a promise of a people and we have a land and a covenant.

And we have a line that we can trace from Abraham through to Jesus and through to the cross. Our covenant of salvation. We talk of the old covenant with Israel and the new covenant with Christ. And the ultimate fulfillment of the promise to Abraham came in the person of Christ. God keeps his promises. Unlike us. My son Samuel has a phrase. But you promised, Dad. It's too late for a game today. But you promised, Dad. I'm too busy to watch a film tonight. But you promised, Dad. [16:32] We're maybe too hard up this month to buy Domino's pizza. But you promised, Dad. Now, Chris reminded last week of the words from Zechariah in Luke 1. To perform the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his covenant.

The oath or the promise which he swore to our father Abraham. So his promises, God's promises, he keeps them. Unlike us. In Exodus 2 we read, God heard their groaning and remembered his covenant with Abraham.

And again we read in Psalm 105, he remembered his covenant. So as I conclude this morning, why does he keep his promise?

It's because of his character and who he is. He made a covenant and he swore on his life that he would do it. And we hear throughout the Bible that he remembered it.

[17 : 36] He remembered that covenant. He is faithful. And he loves us. We sing a song actually about it, don't we? Oh God, he always keeps his promises.

And there's the line that he said the sons of Abraham would be more than the grains of sand. And so his family grew underneath the Pharaoh's rule.

So that's what it is. And that's what we're meant to understand by focusing in on one family and one man, Abraham. God's promise and his salvation love for his people.

We're made in his image and he wants to be in a right relationship with us. Jeff Lucas, writing in this month's Christianity magazine, says, It's easier sometimes to believe that God so loves the world than it is to believe that he utterly loves me.

Now the Bible says that we are greatly loved, that we're the objects of his delight. And like the father in the prodigal son, we're to imagine him picking up his robes and running straight towards us.

[18 : 50] That's how much he loves us. Do you believe that today? Do we believe that? I mean, really believe that? Sure, we believe it up here in our head, God loves us.

But do we believe it here in our heart? God loves us. Or to make it even more personal, God loves me. Now the promise to Abraham shows that he's faithful.

It shows that he keeps his promises. So what have we learned today? We've learned a promise of a people. We've learned about a land and a covenant.

There's been lots of patient waiting. And there's been an acknowledgement of the importance of our honesty with God. It's okay to ask questions of God and to express our doubts and fears.

And we've also learned, and I think we need to be continually reminded, that God loved Abraham, that he loves us, and that God keeps his promises through his covenant.

[20 : 00] Let's pray together. Father God, thank you that you are a God who always keeps his promises.

Thank you that you're a covenant, God, and that you created a way for us to return to you. Help us to believe this and to live our lives in the reality of what that means this week and for the remainder of our days.

In your name we pray. Amen.