

Promises, Promises

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[0 : 00] Some years ago I had a phone call from somebody who purported to be from a radio station.

And it was meant to be a competition. If I picked the right number between 1 and 100, I would win something over \$1,000. Well, a touch sceptical, I said 73.

You've won. He said, \$1,000 plus a bit, I can't quite remember. The money will be in the mail to you in the next fortnight. Well, before he hung up I said, but you haven't got my address.

I was a little bit sceptical. Oh, wait a minute, he said. And then somebody comes on the phone and takes details of my address, which I was a little bit hesitant to give, but I thought, oh, well, what the heck.

And I checked what radio station this was meant to be and asked what frequency it was, because it was a modern station, not the ABC, and I didn't know things like that. And after hanging up I rang this radio station, but the person on the switchboard said they couldn't tell me whether there was a competition going on or not at the moment, that I had to ring back during office hours the next day, which I didn't bother doing.

[1 : 15] The money never came. I wasn't surprised because I didn't believe the guys promised that this money would be in the mail. I'm sure it was a hoax and I was sceptical from the beginning.

Not every day does somebody ring you up out of the blue and offer you, in effect, \$1,000. Well, how would you have felt if you were Abraham? Didn't have telephones in those days, but a voice came nonetheless, God speaking here, Abraham.

And these are the things I promise you. Extraordinary promises, as we'll see in a minute. It's very easy to be sceptical in the light of such promises.

Abraham was 75 years old, married, no kids. Couldn't have children. He was living in Mesopotamia, which is northern Iraq, presumably minding his own business.

Like all the people of Mesopotamia, he probably worshipped a number of different gods for different places, different parts of the weather and climate and so on. And out of the blue, God speaks to him.

[2 : 20] And makes the most outrageous promises that you could ever imagine. How will Abraham respond? These promises that God made, which we heard in the Bible reading, are perhaps the most significant promises that have ever been made.

The whole of the rest of the Bible, and that is all of the Bible except for the first 11 chapters, depend upon these promises that God made to Abraham.

You might think, well, how can that be? The Bible is really about Jesus, and that's the most important thing. But as I'll show later, Jesus depends on the promises that God made to Abraham. That's where it all started.

Well, what are the promises that God made to Abraham? The first one is land. Strictly speaking, the first verse of the chapter that was read isn't a promise. Go, God says to Abraham.

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. No promise there, but a command. But later on, when Abraham has got to that place that God shows him, God says in verse 7, see all this land.

[3 : 30] I will give this land to your descendants. So land is the first promise. A particular land. And it's a land that God gives to Abraham.

Abraham. He doesn't make any conditions. He doesn't say, if you're a good boy now, and eat up your greens, I'm going to give you this land. He doesn't say, so long as you do what I say, I'm going to give you this land.

He just says, I will give you this land. It's God's initiative. And indeed, in those first three verses, God is the subject. I will give, I will give, I will give five times.

It is God's initiative and God's gift to Abraham. Now, Abraham, as I said, was living in northern Iraq in a place called Haran in Mesopotamia.

His father, Terah, had moved up what's now modern Iraq from the south near the Kuwaiti border, not escaping a Gulf War because that's 4,000 years ago that Terah was living, and moved up from Ur to this place called Haran and settled there.

[4 : 31] Some people think that the ancient people were nomads. That is, they all wandered all over the place. But that's not true. Abraham's family had been settled in one place. Then his father had moved to one place and settled there.

And we know from later on in the story of Abraham and his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob that their family home, if you like, was still back in Haran. And that's where Isaac had to go and get his wife, where Jacob went and got his wife, and so on.

So when Abraham is told to move, he's told to do something quite difficult. And he's not given a destination. God just says, go to the land, I'll show you.

Well, one could imagine if you were Abraham saying, well, where is that God? Go. He's all God tells him. To an unknown destination. Presumably God somehow set Abraham in the right direction.

And when he got there, he said, this is it. But it's a bit disconcerting to be told to go and not quite know where you're heading for. At the beginning of last year, I was travelling in Turkey and aiming for a particular spot.

[5 : 37] But the bus drivers and all the people said, no, you can't get there tonight. So we jumped on a bus heading in the same direction. And in fact, when we got an hour's journey and the bus stopped, there was another going further on.

We got on that bus and we didn't know where we were going. We had to look up the guidebook to find the name of the place. And we said, don't go here, it's a dump. Well, thankfully there was another bus going on and we eventually got to where we were.

But the disconcerting nature of not quite sure where you're heading for. It must have been quite bamboozling for Abraham all those years ago. And even more confusing is that when he got to the land, it was full of Canaanites.

It wasn't as though it was terra nullius, is that the word? Arriving in an empty country ready for inhabitation. But it was a land full of other people. And here we have two old people, Abraham and his wife Sarah.

No kids, 75 years old. And they're given a land that's full of foreigners and strangers. If you excuse the pun, God's promise is somewhat outlandish.

[6 : 44] That's only the first promise. The second one is to make him a great nation. Well, if you're going to become a great nation, you at least need some children and grandchildren and descendants to become a nation.

But to a 75-year-old couple without kids, God says you'll become a great nation. Presumably, they've been trying for kids. Kids were more important in those days than they are today.

And yet they were barren and unable to have children. Seems as God is almost mocking them in promising him a great nation. The third promise comes at the end of verse 2.

And I will make your name great. Very clear contrast to the Tower of Babel story we saw last week. The people who built the Tower of Babel striving to make their own name great by their achievement and technology.

But God says, I will make your name great. And as I said last week, whose name is great? We all know Abraham's name. But we don't know the names of anyone who built the Tower of Babel.

[7 : 49] Real fame and real greatness is God's gift in the end. Not human achievement. And the fourth promise comes in verse 3. Though I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse.

And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Abraham is the pivot for the world. How people respond to Abraham determines how God will respond to them.

What an amazing promise. That if somebody blesses Abraham, God will bless them. And if somebody curses Abraham, God will curse them.

But it's not just a promise that Abraham is the dividing line for the world. Between those who curse and those who bless. There's actually a bigger promise than that. Because the end of the verse says, And all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you.

All the families of the earth. All the families of those nations that were mentioned in chapter 10, and were scattered after the Tower of Babel in chapter 11. All of them will be blessed through this one man, Abraham.

[9 : 02] That's not your everyday promise from a radio station competition, is it? What's happening in these promises? Why is God making such extraordinary promises to an obscure man, Abraham?

The promise of land, the promise of being a great nation, the promise of a great name, and fourthly the promise of world blessing through him. Sometimes people, when they read Genesis, stop at chapter 11, and think they're starting a new book, as though there's no connection between the first 11 chapters, and the next, whatever many, 39 chapters.

The first 11 chapters are the story of the creation of the world, the fall of humanity, Adam and Eve, and Cain killing Abel, the story of the flood, it's the story of all the nations of the world being scattered.

It's not really about one person or one line of people so much, as about the whole universe. But when you get to chapter 12, one person becomes important. And thereafter, it's the story of that person's family.

His son Isaac, his son Jacob, and his 12 sons, most notably Joseph. So very tempting it is to think that we've now dealt with one book, and now we're dealing with a family history.

[10 : 21] But these promises to Abraham show that they are, the two parts, if you like, are inextricably linked together. The last promise to Abram was that the whole world, all the families of the world, will be blessed through you.

That is, they're the families that were already mentioned in chapter 10 and chapter 11. What it's saying is that God has not abandoned the world in choosing Abram. He chooses Abram as a means, not an end, of blessing.

That Abram will be the means for the whole world to be blessed. The world that God has created, but the world that's gone astray. The world that's been scattered after the Tower of Babel.

God makes promises to Abram for the sake of that same world and that universe. Some people notice that in the verses, chapter 12, verses 2 and 3, the promises that are made to Abram, a key word occurs five times.

It's a word I've almost avoided using so far. Listen to the two verses and pick the word. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing.

[11 : 42] I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Bless, blessing, blessed five times.

Very important word. What does it signify? It's not just God's benevolent favor being extended here to Abram, to his descendants and to the world. The idea of blessing began in chapter 1.

God made the world, made the animals and made humankind. And he blessed them and said to them, be fruitful and multiply and subdue. God blessed humanity.

When they failed him in the Garden of Eden, God cursed the serpent and cursed the ground. When Cain killed Abel, God cursed Cain. After the flood, because of the sins of Noah's grandson, he was cursed.

And through those 11 chapters, five times the word curse appears. And now to balance it probably, five times the word blessed. But it all points back to the beginning, to the initial creation.

[12 : 50] The promises of God to Abraham are about restoring the original blessing of the universe. God's, in effect, beginning again. He hasn't wiped it all out and started to make heavens and earth and sea and sky and so on again.

But rather he's starting again by choosing one person. Abram. And the descendants and so on that follow from that man. You see, all these promises that God makes to Abram are not for Abram's benefit.

So that he can sit up in his lounge room and put his four trophies of promise on the mantelpiece. And say, these are mine. But all the promises that God gave to Abram were for the sake of the world which had gone astray from God.

And that's what the rest of the Bible is about, as we'll see in a minute. Well, how does Abram respond? If it were you or me, you'd probably say, oh yeah, go on, pull the other leg.

It plays jingle bells or some ancient tune. But no, Abram's response is extraordinary. Abram's response is summarized by the word faith.

[13 : 58] In Hebrews chapter 11, we have the expression, by faith, Abraham went to the land. In effect, is what that verse says.

Abraham's response is faith. He didn't question God. He didn't complain. He didn't ask God for proof. But what do we read in verse 4 after God's promises finish? So Abram went.

Would you go? From your home, your parents' place, your kindred, where you belong, where you've brought up, not even told what land you're going to, but just go?

Where's the guarantee of security? Where's the assurance of the future? But Abram went. All the promises, in effect, depend upon go, in verse 1.

Go to the land. And then God spells out all the promises. And Abram went. Because he had faith in God. And look what he left behind.

[15 : 06] He left behind his family. Because he left his father's house, he left behind his inheritance. Therefore, he left behind his future income, his future security, his future possessions, his future land.

We know that his father lived for at least 60 more years in Haran. He left behind his own identity, probably, of his homeland, where he belonged. You see, Abram's faith was costly faith.

It cost him to give up things that most of us would think are essential things, that we could not do without. For Abram, faith was risky.

It meant giving up what was secure and what was sure in his life for the complete unknown. But very often, faith is risky.

Faith is about renouncing things. That's a thought that's fairly alien to our world. Not many people advocate renouncing things in our age. Rather, they're all about claiming rights.

[16:10] It's my right to do this. It's my right to get married. It's my right to not get married. It's my right to go there or to do this or to have this job or this income or whatever. But Christian faith is often about renouncing things that may well be ours legitimately.

Jesus said as much. Those who seek to save their life will lose it. But those who lose their life for my sake and the gospels will save it.

Faith is a renouncing faith. Being prepared to give up things for the sake of God. Abram did, and of course Jesus did, in dying on the cross.

And he calls us to as well. When Abram got to the land, he went to a place called Shechem in the center of the land. And because he went there, Shechem became a significant place in Old Testament history.

When he got there to the place at Shechem, we're told in verse 7 that he built an altar there. Not just because he needed some sort of ritual. Not because he was claiming the land for himself.

[17:18] But rather as an expression of worship to God. To build an altar, a place of sacrifice. We presume he sacrificed, though we're not told as much. As an expression of worship to God, or faith in God.

A claim, if you like, on the promise that God had made. This is the land that God has promised. In the midst of all the Canaanites, Abram builds an altar. As an expression of trust in God.

That his promise would be fulfilled. Later on, he moved on to Bethel. Pitched his tent near Bethel, we're told in verse 8. And there again he made an altar. To God. Another act of worship to God.

But even more than that, he called on the name of the Lord. Or invoked the name of the Lord. Now that's an extraordinary thing for Abram to have done. We might think, oh yes, to call on the name of the Lord, that's just to pray to God.

But Abram, remember, had come from Mesopotamia. A place where people worshipped all sorts of gods. A God for this place and that place. A God of the sun, a God of the rain, the lightning, the thunder. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

[18:17] But this statement that Abraham invoked the name of the Lord suggests exclusivity. That he called upon God's name and God's name alone.

Not God among all these other gods. But the one God. And that's a radical change. From what's called polytheism, the worship of many gods.

To monotheism, the worship of one God. And that's the change that Abram underwent. Well, what does this teach us? Abraham is the model to follow.

This passage doesn't tell us that. But the New Testament tells us that. The writer to the Hebrews, when he says, by faith Abraham went, is telling us who to model our faith on.

You see, Christian faith is about trusting the promises of God. Very often people tell me, oh, I'm a believer. I have faith.

[19 : 18] I've never met them before. They say, Holy Trinity is my church. I have faith. Don't worry about me. And I think, oh, yeah. I don't see them in church. I don't see them as part of the fellowship of God's people.

How can they claim to have faith? You see, faith, Christian faith is not intellectual assent. Believing something to be true, that's intellectual assent. Christian faith is trusting a promise.

If I say to you, tomorrow I will meet you at 3 p.m. And you believe that promise, you'll be where we say at 3 p.m. tomorrow if you can.

But you won't sit in your lounge room and put your feet up and say, Paul promised that he would meet me at Flinders Street Station at 3 p.m. And I believe that he will, but I'm going to just stay in my lounge chair.

That's not believing the promise at all. If we are people who trust in God's promises, then Christian faith will mean our lives are influenced by that faith.

[20 : 19] We will act. There is no such thing as Christian faith without action. Christian faith is active faith. It results in activity.

It results in trust in God's promises. Our lives will be different if we have Christian faith. Let me give a couple of examples to help you think about how this applies to you.

God promises us the greatest joy this universe can bring. Not necessarily now, this instant, but certainly in heaven.

If you trust that promise, then you will seek that joy and not the elusive, transient, temporary, deceitful joy that this world brings.

But think of what this world offers for joy. The joys of gambling or winning. The joys of wealth. The joys of sex.

[21 : 19] The joys of illicit activity. And I don't mean that there may not be some joy in those things. But if we trust God's promise that the greatest joy comes from him, then we will shun the transient joys that are elicited in this world and seek God's joy.

And that will mean our lives will be changed and influenced, won't it? We'll put aside what this world thinks important because we trust that God's promises are even better than this world's.

God promises us everything we need for eternity. That's not what everything we want, but everything we need.

If we trust that promise, then we will not worry when we lose our job. We will not worry if we lose our house or a family member or our health or our wealth.

Because God promises everything we need. So when we worry and are concerned or anxious about such things, we are to an extent demonstrating a lack of faith in God's provisions.

[22 : 37] Another example, God promises to reward generosity for the gospel's sake. That those who are generous with their time and money for the service of the kingdom of God, God will reward abundantly.

A hundredfold. If we trust that promise, we will be generous with time, talents and money for the service of the kingdom of God.

But if we don't trust the promise, then we won't be generous people, will we? You see, Christian faith will result in action. We cannot say, I trust God's promise to reward generosity, but to zip up our pockets and never unzip them.

God promises perfect security for eternity. That with him we will be protected from any evil. That nothing can separate us from his love or the love of Christ.

That is perfect security. If we trust that promise, then we will rely on God and God alone for our security.

[23 : 49] And we won't rely on our jobs, our families, our houses, our abilities or other things. Yes, to an extent they may be the means of God's protection and security.

But they're not the source. The source is God. So what I'm saying is that if we trust the promises of God, and I've just listed a few, then our lives will be affected at every level by those promises.

By faith. Because faith is not just believing something to be true, but acting upon it. Something that remains in the mind that is intellectual assent only is not Christian faith.

Abram's faith meant that he went. Imagine if he just stayed in Haran and said, Yes God, I trust your promises. And sat down in his lounge room watching an ancient version of the Simpsons.

It wouldn't do much for the furthering of God's purposes, would it? The other thing we learn from Abraham's example is that faith is costly. It means giving up sometimes the things that this world counts dear, or that we may count dear.

[25 : 04] Jesus said as much as I've already quoted. Renouncing the things that we think bring us security or certainty is costly to do. But the promises of God promise us much more than this world ever offers.

The other thing that Abraham's example shows us is that faith, Christian faith, faith in the living God, is often absurd. The last 200 years has seen a great attempt to make Christian faith seem rational and logical and sensible.

And to some extent, of course, it is. There is a level at which Christian faith is absolutely absurd. Who in his right mind, living in Mesopotamia 4,000 years ago, would believe that he might be the pivot for the world?

Who in their right mind, if they were 75 years old and barren, would think that they would become the father of a great nation, owning a great piece of land and being the source of world's blessing?

Nobody in their right mind would believe those sorts of promises because Christian faith and faith in the living God is absolutely absurd. It looks stupid to the world.

[26 : 22] But it's right. Because God is the God of the possible, not the impossible. Things with God are always possible.

And if God promises something, it doesn't matter when we look around the world and think that promise is impossible. It's not. If God promises something, it will come to pass.

And that's what happened with the promises to Abraham. He didn't instantly become a great nation. The next morning, he didn't wake up with hundreds of thousands of descendants, all with armor, ready to conquer the land.

It took him 25 years just to get one son. And indeed, the conquering of the land was well beyond his own lifetime, another 500 or more years away.

And the promise to be the source of world's blessing, why, that didn't happen not only in his son's lifetime or his grandson or great-great-great-great-great-grandson's lifetime, it's still awaiting total fulfillment.

[27 : 22] Certainly when Jesus came, as the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, a great leap forward was taken to bring about the realization of promises. Jesus made it clear that the real children and descendants of Abraham, the real nation that is going to be great, are not those that are racially descended from Abraham, that is what we call today Jews, but rather those of faith.

It was Jesus' argument, it was Paul's argument in Galatians and Romans as well. And we, as Christian people, are the inheritors of those promises. We are the descendants of Abraham because of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The land that was promised to Abraham, Jesus makes clear, is a heavenly inheritance, a heavenly land. And it is ours by faith. And the promise of world blessing through the descendants of Abraham is seen preeminently in Jesus Christ.

For he, of course, is the source of the blessing for the world, to Jew and to Gentile, to every nation in this world. And we are the means of bringing about the fulfillment of that promise.

For Jesus said to his followers, go into all the world, making disciples of all people. When out of the blue, God spoke to Abraham 4,000 years ago, the course of the world's history was charted.

[28 : 48] For what's happened since then, as recorded in the Old Testament and the New, is God keeping those promises. It isn't that the promises came to nothing, that's why God sent Jesus as plan B.

But Jesus came primarily and chiefly to fulfill those very same promises made to Abraham. So if we are to model ourselves on him, we trust in those same promises.

And be assured that God is keeping those promises. Maybe not in our lifetime will we see them all fulfilled. But of course, God's scale of time is far above ours.

Let's pray. Our God, we thank you for the promises that you made to Abraham. And we thank you that he had trust and faith in those promises.

We pray that you may make us people of real faith, that our lives will be shaped by trusting the promises you make. For Jesus' sake.

[29 : 57] Amen. Amen.