

Faith in God's Promises

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- [0 : 0 0] In what ways are we tempted to doubt God? Maybe it's his goodness. Maybe it's his timing. Maybe it's his plan altogether.
- In what ways are we tempted to doubt God? Since we started this series in Genesis, the main idea has been to trust the Lord. So trust the Lord to bless us.
- Trust the Lord in spite of appearances. Trust the Lord in spite of the odds. Last week we added a nuance. We said, don't distrust the Lord. And today another nuance, don't doubt him.
- In what ways are we tempted to doubt God? You see, last week we left Abram and Sarai. They were 86 and 76 years of age and still no promised offspring.
- That was one of God's promises to them. So they took matters into their own hands. They grabbed Hagar, the maidservant, and had that forced surrogacy to create little Ishmael.
- [1 : 0 2] And if impatience was the problem last week, in chapter 17, the problem is impossibility. Impossibility. Because our chapter opens 13 years later since chapter 16 finished.
- Abram, we're told in verse 1, is now 99 years of age. The fair innings. But still no promised children. God's promises were hard to believe.
- But this week they are flat out impossible. And so here is a passage to come back to when it seems so impossible to trust God.
- When we're tempted to doubt him. You see, increasingly we're being asked to place our trust in certain things. So, trust politicians.
- I doubt it. Trust the banks. I doubt it. Trust our culture. I doubt it. Trust other churches. I doubt it.
- [2 : 0 4] And you could even throw God into that mix. So Jesus, God's son, will come to earth. He will die on the cross for our sins. He will rise literally from the grave.
- I doubt it. And this passage encourages us not to doubt God's promises. But to take him at his word. When you're reading the Bible, you're supposed to have the one big idea.
- But today, it's the one big letter. I'm going to use the letter D. You'll see it time and again. And you can see it through the handout. And so let me read from verse 1. Please read along with me.
- To yourselves, that is. When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am God Almighty. Walk before me faithfully and be blameless.
- Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers. You see, the key to understanding chapter 17 is the language in verse 1.
- [3 : 0 3] It says, walk before me faithfully and be blameless. That language is the same language God used of Noah. Remember Noah just a few chapters earlier.
- And so there's a slide on the screen. Thanks, Booth. So you can see the same language. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time. And he walked faithfully with God.

It's the same language. Our author is linking us back to Noah. You see, just as God began a whole new nation with Noah, so he's going to begin a whole new nation with Abram and his offspring.

God is determined. There's a D word. God is determined to start again. You see, only 17 chapters into the whole Bible, there's been a couple of false starts.

So Adam and Eve in chapter 2, they were supposed to be fruitful and multiply and dwell with God. But by chapter 3, it ends in disaster.

[4 : 05] Noah was supposed to be fruitful and multiply. By the time we get to chapter 11, it's a disaster. And so when we get to Abram, we find the similar language to Noah.

We find the similar language in verse 6 of being fruitful. And we have to ask whether Abram will be another nation that will be a false start, just like the rest.

And I guess that's what Abram and Sarah have been asking all along. Are we going to be another false start? But the problem is, things have gotten worse in chapter 17. 13 years have passed, and they are now 99 years old and 89 respectively.

And I don't think anyone's really sure how people aged back then, but can a couple that old have children? I asked my friend Nigel, and his wife are in their, I'm going to say 50s.

And I said, Nigel, would you be willing to start again? He said, not on your life. Would he want to start again? But 99 and 89, to have children then? I doubt it.

[5 : 18] Seems like another false start. But God, as Naomi said, but God is determined to have a people for himself.

This determination is reflected in Abram's new identity. Have a look at verse 5. No longer will you be called Abram. Your name will be Abraham.

For I have made you the father of many nations. You see, his old name, Abram, reflected the family he came from. His new name, Abraham, reflects the family he's going towards.

God's determination is reflected in the way he blows open the scale of the promises. I put a table on your handout. We won't go through all of them, just a couple. So on your handout, previously in chapter 12, he said, I will make you into a great nation.

But now, verse 6, I will make nations, plural. Previously, Abram was to be given a great name. But today we see that he has a royal dynasty.

[6 : 20] In verse 6, we're told kings will come from him. The beginning of the New Testament in Matthew's gospel, it tracks the lineage from Abraham to King David to King Jesus.

Clearly, Abraham's family is no mere house of Windsor. Previously, God established the covenant with Abram. But now, in verse 7, he says, I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants.

There's another D word. After you, for the generations to come. Previously, Abram was to be given the land of Canaan. Now, in verse 8, The whole land where you reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you.

You see, it's no wonder that three out of the four big religions of the world all try and stake their claim to be the children of Abraham, to be the promised descendants of God's blessings.

And it's clear, too, that as the impossibility increases, so too does the scale of what God offers. As the doubt sets in, so does God's determination sort of step up as well.

[7 : 37] But this is the important bit, because I think the heart of God's blessings, the center of his promises, are there in verse 7. Everyone look down at verse 7. He says, I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant.

Then he goes on to say, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. And again, at verse 8, to you and your descendants after you, I will be their God.

See, underneath all of God's blessings seems to be his true desire, another D word, to be their God, to have a relationship with people.

That is the pinnacle of his blessings to mankind. And this desire, it runs right throughout the Bible. So there's on the screen, I won't go through all of them, but just look at the bottom one there, Ezekiel.

My dwelling place will be with them. I will be their God, and they will be my people. This desire, it's quoted many times throughout the New Testament, but supremely in our second reading.

[8 : 40] It's at the end of the Bible. The next slide, please. There it is there. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, look, God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.

They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. How does our doubt stack up against God's determination? It's very persuasive, isn't it, when you see this desire or this determination running right throughout the whole of Scripture, right to the very end?

In spite of impossibility, in spite of false starts, God is determined or desires to have a people, and so much so that he does it all himself.

There's another D word. He does it, or he does it all himself, and this is our second point. Let me ask you, I wonder, have you ever let a child, any of your children, help you with a job?

Do you ever do that? Do you ever let them help you? Maybe it's cooking or cleaning. Maybe it's the gardening. I let my son, RJ, help me to pump petrol, which I've just learned is illegal, so you're not supposed to let anyone under 16.

[9 : 54] Anyway, if this is being recorded, I'm only joking. But the thing is, you know when you let children help you to do things, you do it through sort of gritted teeth, don't you?

Because you know, you're just going to have to do it all over again. And I think God is like that here. He's let his children have a go at helping him with the world.

Previously, he commanded, Adam, be fruitful and multiply, but his offspring were sinners. He commanded Noah, be fruitful and multiply, but his offspring were sinners too.

And so in verse 6, God steps in with this attitude and says, I will do it myself then. He says, verse 6, I will make you fruitful or very fruitful, he says.

And you can see this attitude of doing it yourself in the passage. I wonder if you notice 13 times in our passage is the expression, I will. I will make you fruitful.

[10 : 53] I will make nations of you. I will establish my covenant. I will be their God. So on and so forth. 13 times. I will do it, says the Lord.

So don't doubt. Take me at my word. And actually, I think this is a really interesting thing which I've realized this week. It's not just that God alone will do it.

It's that only God can do it. You see, if Abraham and Sarah having a baby at 86 and 76 years of old is hard to believe, this week, it is laughably impossible.

Laughably impossible because God has deliberately, a D word, God has deliberately allowed 13 years more to pass. Look at verse 17.

Abraham fell face down. He laughed and said to himself, will a son be born to a man? A hundred years old?

[11 : 54] Will Sarah bear a child at the age of 99? And his doubt seems well placed, doesn't it? You can't blame him for doubting. He thinks, therefore, God should cut his losses.

Why don't you carry on the covenant through Ishmael instead? He says in verse 18, And Abraham said to God, if only Ishmael might live under your blessings. You see, at least Ishmael is actually real.

At least he's alive and sort of sitting right there. At least we can carry on the covenant through him, or at least try to. Having a baby at their age is impossible by human standards.

The promised land Canaan, filled with warring tribes, a vacant and permanent possession, impossible by human standards.

A royal line? How can you promise that? Everlasting blessings to your descendants? How can you promise that? Each aspect of the covenant is deliberately impossible by human standards.

[12 : 58] I will send my son, who will die for all human sin, who will rise from the grave to guarantee a resurrection life. Impossible.

God deliberately makes this covenant impossible to show that only he can do it. Back in verse 1, he introduces himself.

He says, I am God Almighty. And the footnote in your Bible, it says, footnote A says, that is also the name El Shaddai. Which, as far as we know, that name means, I am the God of the mountains.

Here are some impossible promises, but it's okay, because the God, who even made the mountains, will deliver. Children at 99, don't doubt.

God Almighty will do it. And actually, I think this gives us reassurance, not to doubt. It's so much better that the responsibility for these promises is in God's hands to do it all.

[14 : 06] See, Adam and Eve, sinners. Noah, a sinner. Abraham and Sarah, total mixed bag. You and me, sinners. It's a relief that God doesn't put any aspect of the covenant in our hands to try and deliver.

Not even 1%. You would end up with another false start. But, God is determined. God will do it all.

And so, He gives us a sign. So, we won't doubt. And this is our last point. Another thing that we'll have to do just as we finish is figure out circumcision and what is the place of circumcision in the New Testament.

And, if there are any children here who want to ask what circumcision is, I'll leave that for your car trip home because there's no way I'm going to explain it. Let's read verse 9.

Then God said to Abraham, as for you, you must keep my covenant. You and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you.

[15 : 15] The covenant you are to keep, every male among you shall be circumcised. It's important to be clear that circumcision or that Abraham is not earning blessings by how well he obeys this circumcision command.

Remember, God has already made the covenant with him in the previous chapters. In verse 11, God says that circumcision is a sign. He says, you are to undergo circumcision and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.

So rather than circumcision earning the covenant, it is just a sign that one exists, that a relationship exists. Let me illustrate. So this is my wedding ring and it's hard to get off sometimes, which is quite good.

So my wedding ring functions in the same way. This ring is a sign to myself and to Rachel and to everyone that a covenant exists.

This ring doesn't make the marriage, as it were, or doesn't make the covenant. That was made through public promises and pieces of paper on the 5th of April, 2013.

[16 : 26] 5th of April, 2013. Five years. Good. But the ring is a permanent sign to me and to everyone else of my relationship status.

It's a sign of the promises that I've made. There was a really great wedding here yesterday for someone from the 5pm service and in the wedding liturgy it says, famous words, I give you this ring as a sign or a symbol of our marriage.

It's a sign of a covenant that's in place. And actually in the Bible God's covenants always have a sign. So Noah's sign was the rainbow.

Moses' sign was the law. David's covenant was the throne. Jesus' covenant is baptism. But circumcision is quite different and this is why it's quite tricky to place it in the New Testament.

Circumcision is not a public sign like a rainbow in the sky or like my wedding ring. It's private in nature. It's only there for Abraham and Sarah when they're tempted to doubt God's promises to make them fruitful.

[17 : 39] Circumcision doesn't make the covenant it just reminds them of God's intention or determination. Just as God permanently changed Abraham's name he permanently changes his flesh.

Halfway through verse 13. my covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. In this way Abraham will always carry around a reminder of God's intention or the commitment God has made to give him offspring.

Think of the wedding rings again. What sign am I making? So I'll tell you last night I went out to a birthday of a friend in the city to a pub. What sign would I be making if before I go in the pub I take off my ring and put it in my pocket to hang out with my buddies?

What sign would I be saying? What am I saying about my willingness to be in my marriage? Not a good sign. But notice in verse 23 have a look at Abraham's willingness.

I put my ring back on. Verse 23 Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them as God told him.

[19 : 01] Again in verse 26, Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that very day. And I wonder if this is part of what makes Abraham the great hero of faith in the Bible.

You see, he has no promised son. He's 99 years old. He has no clue who Jesus is. He's not like us. We have the benefit of the passage of time.

We can look back. We can see God working throughout thousands of years. We can look back and see Jesus' death and resurrection for us. Abraham has none of that.

And yet he doesn't hesitate to do this. It's a painful ritual in the face of doubt and impossibility. And it could say therefore that all we need in the face of doubt is the right sign.

Is that correct? All we need is the right sign to no longer doubt. And in a way that's kind of correct. However, for us the sign can't be circumcision like it was for Abraham.

[20 : 05] There's nothing wrong with circumcision per se. It's just that human hearts are dull. A D word. Human hearts are dull. And so the Old Testament points forward to a better circumcision.

And there's some verses on the slide. So rather than your flesh, circumcise your hearts and therefore do not be stiff-necked or dull any longer.

Circumcise yourselves to the Lord. Circumcise your hearts, you people of Judah. That's it, you people of God. The New Testament also agrees in the next slide.

This is from Romans. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly. And circumcision is circumcision of the heart by the Spirit, not by the written code, not by the law.

You see, for us Christians, we live in a very different age to Abraham. We're under a bigger covenant in Jesus. Our sign is baptism.

[21 : 05] Baptism is an outward sign of an inward circumcision of our hearts by the Spirit. And have a look. Go back one.

There you go. See the Galatians passage on the bottom. Neither circumcision or uncircumcision means anything. What counts is the new creation. You see, if you have put your trust in Jesus, the royal son of Abraham, he deals with our sin.

He deals with the false starts of humanity. He makes us a whole new person, a new creation. as taking place in our hearts as the Holy Spirit circumcises or cuts away our fleshy, sinful selves.

This work has already begun, and in a way, it's better than a sign, because it's a guarantee or a down payment, if you like, on what God has done and what God is going to do, in spite of how impossible it seems.

And this is really important for us because it is so easy to be Abraham and Sarah. It's so easy to doubt in the face of impossible circumstances.

[22 : 24] So we doubt God because of appearances. There doesn't seem to be many Christians left anymore. Sometimes people don't appear to be growing. we doubt God because of the odds.

Good churches are outnumbered these days. Christian morality is so obviously being attacked in our culture. We doubt God because he seems to take forever to do what he says.

And a big one, we doubt God's goodness because for so many reasons, life is often rubbish. God is determined to be in a relationship with sinful me, to forgive me, to take me to his new creation.

I doubt it. It seems too impossible. We need to come back to Genesis 17. He just as circumcision is a secret sign in the flesh, so too in the secret place of your heart, the Holy Spirit has begun to circumcise or cut away your fleshy, sinful selves.

Just as God made Abraham and Sarah a totally new person, so too the Holy Spirit is making us a totally new creation from the heart outward.

[23 : 46] He is doing it all. He's making us ready for a new creation where all the promises of Abraham and all the promises of Jesus will be fulfilled.

He is determined. God will do it all. And so don't doubt. So let me finish with verse 7. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants at Holy Trinity for the generations to come to be your God and the God of your descendants at Holy Trinity after you.

So let's pray. Our Father God, we are tempted to doubt you, your goodness and blessings to us seem impossible quite often.

We praise you, our Father, that you are determined to have a people, that you will do it all. We thank you for the work of the Spirit, a better sign in us, who has already begun to make this happen.

Please, would you make us more like Jesus? Please keep our eyes fixed on that final day. Please help us not to doubt, but to trust you. In Jesus' name, Amen.