

Faith in God's Power and Plan

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I found this kid's book online the other day. It's on the next slide. It says, my dad can do anything, which I thought was kind of nice. You know, the kids think their dad is that big and strong, can do anything they like.

And so I showed the book to my kids and said, you know, this is what you think about me, right? One said, no. And the other one said, hilarious, dad. And then they added, oh, you're just after a sermon illustration, aren't you?

And so apparently I can't do anything at all, not even fool them. There are limits to what we dads can do and mums for that matter as well. But there is one dad or either a heavenly father who can do anything.

Or in the words of our passage this morning, nothing is too hard for the Lord. And we need to be reminded of this from time to time, don't we? Because sometimes it can feel like God's promises to us.

Well, they're just too hard to believe, too impossible to be true. And certainly for Abraham's wife, Sarah, God's promise of having a child at her age was too hard to believe.

[1 : 0 8] In fact, we'll see in our passage, or we heard it from our reading, that this promise was laughable. How can God possibly do that? And so our writer's first point today is that nothing is too hard for the Lord.

His power and his plan will keep his promise. And the writer's purpose is to encourage both Sarah and us to keep trusting in God and his promises.

So point one on your outlines and verse one in your Bibles. The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.

Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried or literally ran from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

He said, if I have found favor in your eyes, my Lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Then let me get you something to eat or literally a piece of bread so that you could be refreshed and then go on your way.

[2 : 1 4] Now that you have come to your servant. Very well, they answered. Do as you say. Now, in verse one, we're told the Lord appeared to Abraham. And that phrase marks the new section in the story of Abraham.

And this section with the three visitors really runs to almost the end of chapter 19, which we'll leave for next week. But here is Abraham at the entrance of his tent because it was the coolest place to be, you know, in the shade with the breeze in the heat of the day.

And he sees three men. One of them is the angel of the Lord who speaks and acts as God himself. We know that from later on. And the other two were told in chapter 19, verse one, are normal angels.

But it seems Abraham immediately recognizes them as special as being from God, because despite being 99 years old and it being the middle of the day, the hottest part of the day, what does he do when he sees them?

Well, verse two, he hurried or literally ran 99, ran from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground before them.

[3 : 23] And while in verse five, he offers them something to eat or literally a piece of bread. Notice that what he actually prepares for them. Have a look at verse six. In verse six, he went to Sarah quick, get three sears of the finest flour.

Now, three sears is a footnote in your Bible, which tells us it's about 16 kilos of flour. This is not a piece of bread. This is massive. And it's not just any old flour.

Verse six, it's the finest flour. And then what does he do in verse seven? Well, he's still running around. He runs to the herd and selects a choice tender calf and then gave it to the servant to prepare.

Now, a whole calf is a lot of meat for three men, even three men who love their meat. It's still a lot of meat. And it's choice tender meat, did you notice? In other words, Abraham recognizes these men are from God and so he serves them with his best, doesn't he?

And I wonder if this is just a little reminder. It's not the big point of the passage, but I wonder if this is a little reminder for us that do we recognize God for who he is and serve him with our best? Do we seek to live his way to the best of our ability, even when it's hard, even when we don't understand, even when we suffer?

[4 : 39] Or do we give him our best of what we can, even if it costs? Do we do our best to meet with his people each week at church, even when it's a real effort, now with the kids or the weather or the parking?

Do we see Abraham recognizes these men are of God and instead of laughing like he did last week, he rightly serves them with his best, doesn't he? But it seems Sarah is not quite at this point yet.

And so these men deliberately bring Sarah into the picture. See verse 9? It's almost out of the blue. They ask in verse 9, oh, by the way, where is your wife Sarah?

They asked him. Oh, they're in the tent, he said. Then one of them said, I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah, your wife, will have a son.

And now that promise in verse 10 about this time next year is almost exactly what God told Abraham last week in chapter 17, verse 21, almost word for word. And so repeating this promise here in chapter 18 is not for Abraham, it's for Sarah.

[5 : 46] You see, it seems they deliberately ask about Sarah to make sure she's listening. You know, when someone mentions your name, suddenly your ears prick up and then they've got your attention.

I was going to pick on someone now to do it, but we won't do that now. That's what they seem to be doing with Sarah, to make sure she's listening, make sure she hears this promise. Because either Sarah hasn't heard the promise recently or more likely finds it too hard to believe.

Because we read in the rest of verse 10, then one of them said, sorry, the rest of verse 10. Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent. It worked, which was behind him.

Abraham and Sarah were already very old and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, after I am worn out and my Lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?

In other words, this promise is too hard to believe. Abraham is 99. Sarah is 89. Their bodies are worn out. I mean, can you imagine having a child at 99?

[6 : 51] Or your grandparents having a child? I can't even imagine us having another child, actually. I know I'm a little way off 99. And although they lived longer back then, clearly, even for them, this is ridiculous.

This is too hard to believe. And so to help her believe, to help her trust, God responds in verse 13. Do you see there? Then the Lord said to Abraham, why did Sarah laugh and say, will I really have a child now that I am old?

Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son. Do you hear that?

Is anything too hard for the Lord? The answer is no. His promises might sometimes seem too hard to believe, too impossible to be true and even laughable.

But nothing is impossible for God. Nothing is too hard for the Lord. And did you notice in verse 14 as well that this child will come at the appointed time?

[7 : 58] Do you notice those words? See, God always had an appointed time for this child to be born. In other words, God has a plan. But it's according to his appointed time, not ours or Sarah's or Abraham's.

See, God wants Sarah to know he has both the power. Nothing is too hard for the Lord. And a plan at the appointed time to keep his promise so that they might keep trusting in him.

And it's the same for us. As I said at the start, God's promises to us can sometimes seem too hard to believe. For example, the promise of Jesus returning in a blaze of glory and us living forever in a new creation, ruling the world with Christ.

I mean, you say that to a non-Christian and it's laughable. And even for some Christians, it's too hard to believe, especially when we turn on the news and see Christians persecuted or oppressed or ridiculed.

Or when we suffer, it's sometimes too hard to believe that God's promised to work for our good. We can think, how can God possibly be working good out of this situation?

[9 : 09] Or when our prayers seem to go unanswered, it's sometimes too hard to believe God's promised to always hear our prayers. We can think he's either ignoring me or he just can't do this one.

When he could well be saying no for our good or wait. Or God's promised to save people using us, you know, our lives, our prayers, our words is sometimes too hard to believe because we either mess up the message, get tongue tied when we try and explain the gospel.

Or when we do speak it, nothing happens. You know, our friends and family aren't converted. Or we look at the person and think there's no possible way they could ever become a Christian.

When God's promises seem too hard to believe, we're to remember nothing is too hard for the Lord. He will keep his promises to us, but at the appointed time, not ours.

In other words, God has the power and a plan to keep his promises so we can keep trusting in him. And not just keep trusting in him, but also keep living righteous lives for him.

[10 : 18] This was particularly important for both Abraham and Sarah to do because God would use their righteousness and that of their nation, Israel, to actually accomplish his other promise of blessing to the nations.

So we're at point two now and verse 16 in your Bibles. Have a look there. When the men got up to leave, they looked down towards Sodom and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way.

Then the Lord said, shall I hide? He's talking to himself here. Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation. And notice this, the promise from chapter 12.

All nations on earth will be blessed through him. Why? Well, for I have chosen him so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right or literally righteous and just so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised blessing to all nations.

Now, God, I'm sorry, I meant to read verse 20. So at verse 20, we're pretty, I think he's now talking to Abraham because Abraham finds out what he's about to do.

[11 : 35] So verse 20, the Lord said, the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me.

If not, I will know. Now, it's hard to imagine God doesn't know what Sodom and Gomorrah is like. He's God. And so he knows. And next week we'll know too.

And so coming down to see is not really to kind of find out. He already knows. Rather, the language of coming down to see is the language of coming down to judge. The last time God used this language in Genesis was the Tower of Babel on the next slide.

So do you remember this? They built a tower to make a name for themselves and God says, let's go down and see what's going on. But really, he was coming down to judge them by confusing their languages and scattering them.

And so this language of coming down to see is really coming down to judge Sodom and Gomorrah. And he deliberately tells Abraham about it. Why? Well, because God's promise to bless the nations involves him, Abraham, and the nation of Israel after him.

[12 : 47] And in particular, God's plan to bring this blessing to the nations involves using the righteousness of Abraham and the nation Israel after him. Look at the logic again in verse 18.

I read it slowly before to try and help you see it. But verse 18, God says, Abraham will become a great nation. That's Israel. And all nations will be blessed through him. How?

Well, verse 19 starts with four because God chose him so that in response, Abraham might teach his descendants, his children, his household, the nation after him to keep the way of the Lord.

Doing literally in the Hebrew righteousness and justice. Why? Why? Well, verse 19, so that God can bring about his promise of blessing all nations through him.

Did you see the logic? In other words, God is going to use the righteousness of Abraham and the nation of Israel to keep his promise of blessing to the nations. It kind of works like this.

[13 : 49] So on the next slide is a passage from Exodus 19. This is what God says to Israel later on. He says, if you indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, that is, walk in my ways, be righteous, follow my commands and so on.

You shall be my treasured possession among all peoples. And he says, for all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests towards the rest of the earth.

You'll be a holy nation. He says, these are the words that you ought to speak to the people of Israel. You see, Israel is to obey God, keep his ways, be righteous, like loving one another, being faithful to one another.

And then they would stand out as a holy nation compared to the other nations. They'd stand out like a city on a hill, like a light stands out in a dark place. And as a light attracts others, so they would attract the nations to them and to their God.

They would then act like priests and pray for these people and speak to these people about their God so that these people from the nations might trust God and be saved.

[14 : 55] They might receive the blessing of salvation. That's how God's evangelistic plan was to work. That's how he would keep his promise of blessing to all nations through Abraham.

I remember one time we were camping and it was nighttime and so obviously dark and the kids were busting together the toilet. You know, that's the word they always use, busting together the toilet.

And so I gave one of the kids a torch and they were to light the way for the others to the amenities block. And by doing so, that one child with the light led the other kids out of darkness to the blessing of the toilet.

And when you're busting, a toilet is a blessing, right? But you get the illustration, don't you? God was to use Israel, whose righteousness was to shine like a light and lead people from the nations out of darkness and judgment to the blessing of salvation as one of God's people.

And so here God starts to show Abraham his evangelistic plan. He tells Abraham what he's about to do to Sodom to provoke Abraham to plead or pray for Sodom like a priest might pray for people.

[16 : 06] And as he does, God shows Abraham that while his judgment is just. He's more than willing to save wicked people for the sake of righteous people.

Have a look at verse 23. Then Abraham approached him and said, The Lord said, If I find 50 righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare or save the whole city, including the wicked, for the sake of the righteous.

Do you see what is being said here? Here we learn two things. Learn, firstly, that God's judgment is just. He will not treat the righteous and the wicked the same.

The judge of all the world will do what is right. And we'll need to remember that next week when we come back to chapter 19. But the second thing that God teaches Abraham here and us is that God will graciously save the wicked from judgment because of the righteous.

Abraham doesn't ask to pluck the righteous out of the city and then judge the wicked. No, no. He says save the wicked because of the righteous. And God is willing to do that.

[17 : 41] God is willing to use righteous people to save those who are not, you see. And so Abraham continues in verse 27. Then Abraham spoke up again. Now that I've been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes.

What if the number of the righteous is less five less than 50? Will you destroy the whole city for the lack of five people? And God said, if I find 45 there, I will not destroy it.

And once again, he spoke. And what if only 40 are found? And God said, for the sake of 40, I will not do it. Then Abraham said, may the Lord not be angry. Let me speak. What if only 30 can be found there?

And God answered, I will not do it if I find 30 there. Abraham said, now that I've been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only 20 can be found there? He said, for the sake of 20, I will not destroy it. And then Abraham said, may the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more.

What if only 10 can be found there? God answered, for the sake of 10, I will not destroy it. And when the Lord had finished speaking with Abraham, he left and Abraham returned home.

[18 : 42] I remember going to Fiji one time as part of my university course. It was a good university course. When I was there, you had to haggle and negotiate for everything, even a bottle of water.

And even here in Australia, there are places like the good guys that expect you to negotiate, don't they? And I love a bargain, so I'm always happy to negotiate. Michelle just says, wait until I go away, and then you can start.

But it sounds like that's what Abraham is doing with God here, doesn't it? Negotiating, haggling with God. And God is happy to let him do that, because he's happy to graciously save the wicked for the sake of the righteous.

Or put differently, God is making the point that he's keen to act graciously to save others through those who are righteous. And Abraham needed to learn this principle, because he and his nation of Israel after him, were to be God's righteous people through whom God would save the nations or people from the nations.

Now, the wicked, of course, would still need to repent and trust in God's word. And sadly, next week, we'll see none of them do, apart from three. In fact, we'll see next week there are sadly not even 10 righteous people in Sodom.

[19 : 59] And so the city is destroyed. And yet God still uses Abraham to graciously save some. A lot and his two daughters, who he wasn't acting particularly righteous at that point, who were in the city.

And so if we skip ahead just for a moment over the page to chapter 19, verse 29. Look at the end of the story. So on the left hand side of the Bibles there, chapter 19, verse 29.

Look at why Lot is saved. It's not because Lot is righteous. It says, So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham.

And he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot lived. In other words, Lot is saved because of righteous Abraham.

See, God must judge Sodom, sadly. But he uses it as an opportunity to teach Abraham that his promise to bring blessing to the nations involves working through the righteousness of him and his nation Israel.

[21 : 03] And so to put the whole chapter together, in verses 1 to 15, God deliberately reminds Sarah nothing is too hard for him. He has the power and a plan to keep his promise of a child.

And God does that so that Abraham and Sarah might trust him and keep living righteous lives for him. Teaching their children and their descendants, Israel, after them.

Because, verses 16 to 33, God is going to work through the righteousness of Israel to keep his other promise of blessing to the nations.

That's how it works together. That's how the chapter fits together. Sadly, of course, Abraham's nation of Israel didn't live in righteousness and justice, did they? They didn't keep God's ways.

But because nothing is too hard for God, even a nation that refuses to listen to him, he still keeps his plan to bring blessing to the righteousness of his people.

[22 : 04] Or in this case, his person. Because, as you know, Abraham starts here, grows into a nation, Israel, but they don't keep righteousness. And so it dwindles down to one person who is righteous.

Who is? Just say it so I know you're listening. Jesus. That's right. Jesus is the righteous one. So we read on the next slide, 1 Peter chapter 3, Christ died for our sins once for all.

The, notice, righteous one for the unrighteous. That's us. To what? To bring you to God. To give you the blessing of salvation.

See, Jesus is the righteous person. He always kept God's ways. And so he didn't have to pay for his own sin. Instead, he was free to pay for ours, which he did on the cross. And through this righteous person, God graciously offers the blessing of salvation to all people, even people here in Melbourne today.

To graciously save us from the judgment we deserve and bring us home to heaven. If we believe in him, that is. And so do you believe in Jesus?

[23 : 16] Do you trust that God can save you from judgment and bring you to heaven through him? If you don't believe in Jesus, you need to, because the blessing of salvation comes only through him.

He's the only righteous one, you see. And if you do believe in Jesus, then not only do you have the blessing of salvation, but God considers you righteous like Abraham.

We are given Jesus's righteousness. And we are one of God's people now, too. And this means that, firstly, we are to recognize God for who he is and serve him with our best, just as we saw Abraham do.

Secondly, we are to remember nothing is too hard for the Lord. His power and plan will mean he keeps his promises to us at the appointed time.

So we can trust him, even when his promises seem too hard or too impossible to believe. But what's more, thirdly, we are to keep living righteous lives for him, because now that he has saved people through righteous Jesus, as we become Christians, he then uses our righteousness to save others.

[24 : 29] We heard a bit about this from our second reading. So on the next slide, Paul writes to Timothy, and he urges them that we are to pray for all people, as well as those in authority.

Why? Because God desires all people to be saved. God uses the prayers of his people, us, to save others. And so do keep praying for those friends and family who don't know Jesus.

Even if you've been praying for years and years, for nothing is too hard for the Lord. But it's at his appointed time.

What's more, God can not only use our prayers, but he can also use our lives. And so on the next slide, Jesus himself said, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds, your righteousness, and glorify your Father in heaven.

Or on the next slide, the Apostle Paul writes, be wise in the way you act towards outsiders. Make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

[25 : 37] To live wisely in Colossians is to live like Christ, because in Colossians, all wisdom is found in Jesus. And so as we live like Christ, as we follow God, live rightly, righteously, it all means the same thing.

As we live open, authentic Christian lives, if you like, we are to let our light shine before others and provoke them to ask questions. Notice how Paul assumes we have to give an answer, which means someone's asked us a question, doesn't it?

There's a guy in my Bible study group who's been getting an Uber taxi to Bible study, because, you know, everyone knows what Uber, I had to explain it to the other services, but everyone knows what an Uber driver is, because he can't drive, and he just lives a Christian life openly.

And so when the driver said, oh, where are you going tonight? He just said, Bible study. Bible what? And over the last couple of weeks, this guy from church has been, you know, just living an open Christian life, asking after the driver, offering to pray for him.

And this taxi driver, who is a Muslim, has started asking questions. In fact, last Wednesday night, at Andrew Moody's talk on biblical spirituality, this Uber driver gave this guy a lift again, and then he stayed.

[26 : 55] He came in and listened to the talk, intently, apparently. Now, only God knows where this will lead. And often he uses us just to move people one step on.

We don't always see the full conversion. But the point is, all this started from living righteously. That is, living as Christians who openly and lovingly talk about God, keep his ways.

And for us, with very westernized friends and family, this journey can often be much slower, because people in our culture aren't as open as talking about religion, as people in other cultures, like this Uber driver.

But if we live righteously, they do notice. People do notice. It's happened to some other members of our church. In fact, another member of this congregation was telling me that a colleague of his at work, this was last year, I think it was, his marriage split up.

And because this colleague saw our church member, knew he was a Christian, and practiced what he preached, this colleague came to our church member for advice, just to talk.

[28 : 00] And they struck up a relationship, and they started praying together, and our church member got the chance to share the gospel with this guy. And if you are grandparents here, then sometimes grandchildren go through hard times at school or university, and if they know granddad or grandma is a committed Christian, I've heard it happen before, then they'll come to you.

You go, what do I do here? It's a bit hard to talk to mom and dad about these things. Parents don't like listening to their kids, and kids don't like listening to their parents. It's universal. But maybe the grandparents, and so on.

Now, I realize all this can be scary sort of stuff, and one of the promises that sometimes find, that we find too hard to believe, is that God will actually use us to save others. Because we either mess it up, or get tongue-tied when we speak the gospel, or when we do speak, nothing seems to happen.

Our friends and family aren't saved. Or people just seem too impossible to become Christians. But remember, nothing is too hard for the Lord. His power and plan will accomplish His promises to us.

He will use us to either harden or save people, and bring them into His kingdom or not. And so keep trusting in Him, and keep living righteously for Him.

[29 : 20] Let's pray. Amen. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you that nothing is too hard for you, but that you keep your promises at your appointed time.

And so knowing your power, and that you have a plan, help us to keep trusting in your promises. But more than that, help us also to keep living righteously for you, to live Christian lives openly, that you might use us to save others.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.