

God's Promises Bearing Fruit

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[0 : 0 0] of God. We've been thinking about those promises. What are those promises that God has made? We've been seeing how these promises made to Abraham right back here in Genesis, the very first book of the Bible, are promises that stretch right through to us today and into the future as well. Promises of blessing, promises of an inheritance, promises ultimately of relationship with God himself, of being his people, and promises that continue today for God's church.

And we've been thinking, as I said, a bit about what it means, what it looks like to live in light of those promises, to live by faith in those promises. And perhaps most of all, why it is that we are able to have this certain faith in what God has promised. That as we try and align our lives with these promises, we can be confident that they are not empty words, but are promises that we can rely on. Again, we've seen how we're all looking for hope somewhere. We're all depending on someone or something. All of us need a foundation on which to build our lives. And how actually it is God, and only God, who is the person who can bear that weight and who will never let us down, as he will fulfill his promises. That's what we've been looking at. That's a bit where we're going this morning. Last week in our series through Genesis, we had the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. That was kind of the high point of the story so far. This long-awaited child, this offspring that arrived next week in chapter 22. I won't give you any spoilers, but that's perhaps the most well-known part of Abraham's story. Do make sure you're here next week for that.

This week, in some ways, we have what could seem to be a bit of a low-key or even kind of insignificant section connecting these two other parts. But actually, what we're seeing here, and I think this is a great section, what we're seeing here is how all the promises made to Abraham right back in Genesis chapter 12 are starting to be fulfilled and worked out in really concrete ways in his life.

As we move, I suppose, through to spring, as our thoughts think, spring-type thoughts, we might think of these as kind of shoots of fulfillment pushing through, showing that God is going to do what he has promised. And so again, for us, we stand on the same promises. What are these kind of tangible fulfillments? What are these shoots of fulfillment that we're able to see here and now? What is God's work in the present, giving confidence that he will do all he has promised, now and for all eternity?

Two aspects of God's promise to Abraham that are in focus here, and we're going to look at each one of those in turn. And so first is this, that Abraham is blessed in order to be a blessing. Abraham is blessed in order to be a blessing. Verse 22, we read this, at that time, Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, said to Abraham, God is with you in all that you do. Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants or with my posterity, but as I have dealt kindly with you, I will deal with you so you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned.

[3 : 39] And Abraham said, I will swear. Now we met Abimelech back in chapter 20. If you were here a couple of weeks ago, he is the king of an area called Gerah. Back in chapter 20, remember Abraham was actually so frightened of the king and his people that he lied about Sarah being his wife so that they wouldn't hurt him. So Abimelech, the king, Phicol, we're told, is the commander of Abimelech's army. And so here are kind of the top brass arriving to speak to Abraham. Here are the people of power, and they come to Abraham. And what do they say? Well, they don't say, as we might expect, look, you're on our turf here.

You better do as we say. They don't come to try and impress Abraham and emphasize their authority and power over him. Instead, incredibly, actually, they say to Abraham, they recognize God is with you in all that you do. And they want an oath from Abraham that he will deal with them in kindness as they have previously with him. They come to Abraham with humility. Why? Well, because the first thing they see, the first thing that they say, they see that God is with him. And so what's going on here?

Well, if we were to turn back to Genesis chapter 12, where Abraham's story begins with God making these gracious promises, we've referred back to Genesis chapter 12 a number of times. What is the first promise that God makes to Abraham? Well, chapter 12, verse 2, God says, It is that promise that is coming to fruition here in chapter 21. That recognition that Abraham is blessed in order to be a blessing. Abimelech and Phicol say, Look, we see that God is with you.

We see that God is blessing you. Now, please, won't you deal kindly with us? Won't you bless us by showing this kindness to us and our descendants after us? We've shown this kindness to you. Won't you show this same kindness in turn? And actually, the Hebrew word there for kindness is a famous word, hesed. It's a word often translated, steadfast love. It's the word so often used of God's covenant love.

That kindness that Abraham has received, he's to pass on. So what we're seeing here is Genesis chapter 12, of blessed to be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, being put into action. Now, the tangible outworkings of this promise of what God has said he will do. And so Abraham swears that he will act in line with this. Again, ultimately not because of what Abimelech has done, not because of what he, Abraham has done, but because this is what God has promised. And here we see Abraham committing to live in light of the promises of God, that through Abraham, the nations will be blessed. And incredibly, we see here the nations themselves coming in to recognize that and asking for that blessing.

[7 : 32] And so that's what we see here in the story so far. One of the things that I've really enjoyed about looking through these, this Abraham kind of narratives as we've been in it, something that's been so important is as we've been pulling those threads and seeing these same promises and the outworkings of them being fulfilled at different stages in the big story of the Bible, especially as we've seen how through the work of Jesus, these promises work themselves out in our lives as a church today. Again, Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of that promise that through Abraham and his offspring, all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. I hope that is starting to sound familiar by now.

Jesus comes as the promised descendant of Abraham. We've seen before how into the New Testament, that part of the Bible written after Jesus was born, we can trace that genealogy down from Abraham to Abraham to Jesus. And it is Jesus through his perfect life, that life of perfect obedience, perfect trust in God's promises and word. It is Jesus through his sacrificial death, that death on a cross in the place of sinful people. It is Jesus through his glorious resurrection, the sign of his victory and God's vindication of him, that ultimate blessing of forgiveness, forgiveness of being God's people is realized for all who turn to him.

So we have that incredible blessing in the gospel. God has blessed the nations through the descendants of Abraham. And yet as the church is then formed through the gospel, as the church then comes into being, a people rescued by God's grace, given that incredible blessing of forgiveness that we could never deserve. The church we've seen then takes on that role of God's nation, as it were, of being God's people, that we are blessed in order to be a blessing, just as we see here in Abraham.

And so I suppose the question in some ways is to ask this, wouldn't it be incredible for that to be recognized by those around us as it was here in Genesis chapter 21?

Wouldn't it be incredible for people to come to us, to me, to you, to us as a church and say, oh God is with you in all that you do. Won't you pass on some of that blessing, some of that kindness to us? Wouldn't that be amazing? And I'm sure that as you are sitting here, and as I'm saying this, we're not expecting that language, are we? We're not expecting someone to walk up to us in the street and say, oh God is with you. And yet, although that's not the language we're likely to hear, what about people saying to us things like, you know, I see that when really tough things hit, that you're not just fake and pretending that nothing's an issue, and yet still you seem to have a sense of real security. Or a wonderful example I heard recently where someone said to a Christian friend that I notice you never really speak negatively of people, or talk about people behind their back to bring them down. And so we might not expect people to come and say to us, you know, God is with you. But perhaps we might expect people to recognize something of the evidence of the outworking of that in our lives. Those examples, how we respond to hardship, how we deal with others, they are both examples of the gospel, those taking root and bearing fruit in our lives. Those are things that come from finding the great blessing of finding our security in Jesus, that through him we are secure in God's love for us.

[11 : 41] And when those blessings are recognized in how we live, we could think of countless more examples of what that might look like. We're then provided with that great opportunity to provide the ultimate blessing to the world around us by speaking of Jesus as the reason for that security.

And the source behind any humility or stability or generosity that we might have. We get that opportunity to point to Jesus, the fount of every blessing, as the great hymn says.

We show people the greatest kindness of all by pointing to Jesus' kindness that we have received through his grace. Because that kindness, that gospel grace is available for them too, is available for all the people, is a blessing to the nations, and is their greatest need.

We get that opportunity, having been blessed, to bless others. And it's important to remember as well, this is not just an individual thing, but this is a church thing too, that collectively we are God's people, blessed in order to be a blessing. Again, how do people recognize God is with you in all that you do? What's the evidence to the world of God's presence in a church community? Well, one particular evidence which Jesus tells us is that this, by this all people will know that you are my disciples, that you love one another.

As people interact with a church community that shows genuine love for others, where the grace that we have received is put into action with one another, well, that is a great blessing from God. The church family is a gift from God.

[13 : 32] And again, we receive that blessing. We are blessed in order to be a blessing, that people might be drawn into a loving community, that people might experience that love and care toward them, but ultimately that people might hear the message of Jesus and his kindness and his love and care, his steadfast love shown in the gospel.

As a church, we want to demonstrate the truth of God with us in how we act, in how we live, that we might bless those around us by sharing the good news with them. And I would be really keen to say this morning, if you're here and you're not a Christian, if you're still thinking about what that means, if you're still asking questions.

As always, we are delighted to have you with us. We really hope that you'll keep on coming. We hope that you'll feel welcomed. We hope that you'll feel able to ask questions that you have and discuss things further. Above all, we'd hope that our prayer would be, there would be something about a church community which would make you think, there is something different here, hopefully in a positive way, there is something good here, and that our prayer would be that if that is the case, that you would look beyond us, that we would be able to bless you by pointing to Jesus. Because he alone is where ultimate kindness, ultimate love, ultimately that blessing we need of forgiveness is found.

If God is with us, if we have received God's blessing, and in Christ we have, then just like with Abraham, people should recognize that. We want people to see something of that in our lives.

And through that, we have that privilege of being able to pass on that blessing, that hope, that joy, by pointing them to Jesus and the gospel as good news for them too.

[15 : 24] So that's the first kind of concrete fulfillment of these promises to Abraham that we see being worked out in this passage, and that we want to see the concrete working of that in our lives too, that we would be blessed in order to be a blessing, that having received the love of God in Jesus Christ, we would share the love of God in Jesus Christ with those around us.

So Abraham is blessed to be a blessing. The next thing we see, the second kind of shoots of promise fulfilled, is this, that Abraham secures a place in the land.

So remember back to those covenant promises God makes to Abraham that we've kept on coming back to. What are they? They are blessing. We've just spoken about that.

They are offspring or a nation. We saw that last week, beginning to bear fruit with the birth of Isaac. And they are land. The promised land is the third aspect of that promise.

Chapter 12, verse 8, To your offspring I will give this land. And it's that aspect of this promise that we see developing here. Do have a look down into your Bibles if you have them as we kind of work out what's going on.

[16 : 39] There is a kind of an incident regarding a well here that Abraham mentions in verse 25. Following that, Abraham and Abimelech make this oath, this covenant that Abraham will deal kindly with them.

That's what we've just been speaking about. It's maybe interesting to note here that there are kind of covenant type words throughout these verses. You see them there, oath, covenant, swear, kindness.

Even the number 7, which is repeated, sounds like the Hebrew word for oath. I think the idea is that we're supposed to have kind of covenant at the front of our minds all the way through this passage.

Not just this covenant here between Abraham and Abimelech. But bigger than that, this constant reminder that we are seeing the outworking of God's covenant with Abraham stretching forward from chapter 12.

So covenant is all over this. This covenant is made. And then have a look after that. Verse 28, it says this. Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock apart.

[17 : 45] And Abimelech said to Abraham, what is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs you have set apart? He said, these seven lambs you will take from my hand, that this may be a witness for me that I dug this well.

And so we come back to this kind of well dispute that we mentioned earlier. What's happening here? One of my nephews, when they were a baby, was very known for his unusually strong grip.

And if you tried to take anything that was his, he would hold it tight and stare at you and just say, mine. Like this. And in some ways, that's what Abraham is saying here.

Abraham, in this passage, is establishing that this is his place. This well, no more is that to be seized.

No more is that to be claimed by others. This is mine, Abraham is saying, built by me. And obviously, wells are important.

[18 : 48] Water is essential to life. And there wasn't that much around. But you might well be sitting there thinking that surely the Bible has some more important, more significant things to teach us about than this one particular well that Abraham made.

And yet the point is this. The significance is here that God has promised Abraham this land. And here in chapter 21, for the first time, there is a place in it where Abraham can carve his name, as it were.

Can legitimately claim as his, mine. And have that provision and that security. Again, this is a sign, a taster of these promises starting to come into fruition.

And we're told the well is at a place later named Beersheba. And later on in the Bible, the phrase from Dan to Beersheba is repeatedly used to signify the whole of the promised land.

Dan right in the north, Beersheba right on the southern point. It's like how we'd say kind of land's end to John O'Groats. And so here what we're seeing is that Abraham just has a foot in the door.

[19 : 59] Abraham just has a place. There is still so much to come. And yet here is that promise bearing fruit. As God starts to provide for Abraham in the land he has promised.

And so again, we get to that question. How does this land promise fit into our story as a church today? How do we pull this thread through the Bible?

What are we expecting? We've touched on this a few times over the last couple of months. In the New Testament times, we are not looking for a geographical place as the fulfillment of this promise.

But rather we are promised that our inheritance is kept in heaven for us. We are told that the promised land will find its fulfillment in the promised new creation.

Which will be the eternal home for all of God's people. We will have a place there through the work of Jesus if our trust is in him. Again, Jesus is the focal point through which all of these promises find their fulfillment.

[21 : 08] And it is through him that they flow into the church. And like Abraham at this point in chapter 21, we don't have the fullness of that yet.

No one here needs me to tell them that we are not yet in the perfect new creation. Where we are promised that there will be no more tears, no more death, no more mourning, no more crying, no more pain.

We see those things in the world all around us. We experience those things ourselves. And yet like Abraham, we are sustained by God in the present.

And that gives us this great assurance about what's to come. That God will bring to fulfillment what he has promised. And so what is that assurance for us?

What is the evidence of God's promise that we have here and now? Which proves that we will receive fully what is in store. Abraham had his well. What do we have?

[22 : 10] We might ask. I think there's probably different answers we could give to that question. But one answer that the Bible certainly gives is that we have the gift of the Holy Spirit. Again, into the New Testament.

We're told in Paul's letter to the Ephesians that in Christ, again, all this funneled through Jesus. In Christ, we are sealed with the promised Holy Spirit who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it to the praise of his glory, Paul writes.

And the fulfillment of this promise of the land is perfection with God in his presence for all eternity. And yet we have the beginning of that, not just as God came in the person of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

But that those trusting in him have the gift of his Holy Spirit, God in us. Sustaining us, keeping us going, and ultimately guaranteeing our place in the perfect fulfillment of what God has promised us with God.

And the perfection of the new creation for all eternity. One of the things I would love us as a church and as individuals to take away from this time in the life of Abraham is to deepen our sense of assurance in God.

[23 : 35] And in our place with him. That his word really is worth building our lives upon. We're not wanting a false assurance. We could only have this assurance if we're trusting in Jesus.

If we're turning away from our sin. If we're repenting and turning to Christ. He alone is where these blessings promised to Abraham and to us as his descendants are found. But if we've done that, and remember that invitation is available to everyone.

If we've turned to Jesus, our prayer is that we would be built up in knowing that God will remain faithful to his promises. We have seen that promise achieved through Jesus.

We experience that in a concrete way here and now through the work of the Holy Spirit. We are told in the book of Romans that it's the Holy Spirit that enables us to cry out, Abba, Father.

The Spirit reminds us that we are God's people now. That God has kept his promise. And again, as we wait for the fulfillment, the consummation of that when Jesus returns.

[24 : 40] And so if you're here this morning and faith feels hard. If you're here this morning and keeping going, following Jesus is difficult. And I know that is the case for a number of people.

And even if that's not your experience this morning, it's good to be aware that for many people it is. If that is you, the encouragement here is to cling on to these shoots of fulfillment.

Jesus has come. We have been brought back to God. The Holy Spirit dwells in you. And it's that assurance that God will bring his promises to complete fulfillment.

And will bring us to our eternal home with him. And that assurance then which Abraham receives in this passage, these shoots of fulfillment enable him and move him finally to worship.

Verses 33 and 34. Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines.

[25 : 46] As we close this passage, we're left in no doubt that this isn't it. That this isn't the end of the story. We're told Abraham is sojourning still. He's not yet home.

We're told he's in the land of the Philistines who would become the enemy of God's people. And yet he calls on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God.

Now again, there's this echo here of chapter 12. We're having received these promises. God calls on the name of the Lord in worship. Now seeing these promises begin to come into fruition.

Again, Abraham calls on the name of the Lord in worship. And we'll finish here because time is short. We are not home. There is more to come.

Like Abraham, we are sojourners in this world. Surrounded by those who don't know or follow Christ. And yet because of his promises, we can worship.

[26 : 46] Because God will bring them to completion. As Abraham says, he is the everlasting God. He is the God who is the same yesterday, today, forever.

He is the God who will keep his promises. And this passage encourages us as the church in line with God's promises. That we are blessed in order to be a blessing.

We have that opportunity here and now to be sharing good news with those around us. We are given that mission by God. And we do that secure knowing that we have the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The guarantee of our inheritance. That God will bring us hope. And with this mission and with that assurance, we live lives of worship in the present.

In anticipation of the perfect future that the eternal God has promised. That has begun through Jesus. And we can be certain we'll bring to fulfillment when Jesus returns.

[27 : 47] Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a God who has made great promises. That you will bless us. That you will use us.

That you will bring us to a perfect home. To be your people for all eternity. Lord, we thank you that you have kept those promises in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We thank you that your words are not empty words.

But that Jesus laid down his life because of your faithfulness to do as you had promised to do. Lord, we thank you that all of your promises find their yes and amen in Jesus.

And Lord, as we live in these present days. Where we have seen your faithfulness in Jesus. And yet still await the fulfillment of all that is in store. We thank you for what we do have here and now.

We thank you that we have that blessing of forgiveness. And that we're able to hold that blessing out to others by pointing to Christ. We thank you that we have your presence with us now.

[28 : 47] Lord, helping and sustaining us day by day. Leading us on as we look ahead to enjoying your perfect presence in the new creation. Lord, we ask that these shoots of fulfillment.

These tangible signs that you are faithful to your promises. That would move us to worship you in every aspect of our lives. Living for you now in light of the promises that you have made in the past.

And in light of the perfect future in store and still to come. And Lord, we pray that as we do that. That you would receive the glory that you and you alone deserve.

And that we might point many people to the incredible grace and kindness and mercy. That is offered to them in Jesus Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.

Amen. Amen.