

The Assurance of God's Promises

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[0 : 0 0] garage. Lionel Messi was diagnosed with a growth hormone deficiency in childhood. Harley Davidson, the big motorbike company, began with two friends making a motor to attach to a pushbike in their garage. Countless other examples with great things, starting from small beginnings, and presumably on those journeys, on the way to greatness, there must have been times of uncertainty. There must have been times when people wondered, is this ever going to happen? Are we ever going to reach our kind of end goal? Or should I just pack it in and call it a day? And really, that's kind of what we're seeing in the story of Abraham, hasn't it? We've already seen over the last couple of weeks this kind of unlikely start, that Abraham is not a likely hero, but God's promises of great things nonetheless. Here in chapter 15, we're going to see how, understandably perhaps,

Abraham at times came to wonder, is this really going to happen? How can God do what he has said he will do? Particularly in this passage, in terms of God's promise of offspring, that Abraham would father a great nation, and of land, that God would give this nation a place, an inheritance to call their own. Well, at this point in Genesis, at chapter 15, Abraham is still childless, his wife Sarai is still barren, and he's essentially a nomad. He owns no land, and there is certainly no guarantee that wherever he calls home, will be passed on to those who come after him. So we kind of understand the questions Abraham asks in this chapter. We're going to see what God says to those. And again, really important, really important as we see this, as we look through the whole life of Abraham, really important that we remember, this is not just history. This is not just an interesting story about some guy from a long time ago, where we might learn a few lessons from his example.

As we look at the story of Abraham, we are looking at our story as a church. We're really going to see this morning how these promises made those thousands and thousands of years ago, particularly the promise of offspring and land, still apply to us today and find their fulfillment in the church. And as we do that again, like Abraham, we might be tempted to think, well, really? Is this really going to happen?

When we see how great the fulfillment of these promises are, but how can we know God will see these things through to the end? Again, just like for Abraham, we might find things often look unlikely.

Things can often look quite small. But we'll see how God in his kindness gives us the confidence so that we can know that he will do as he has promised. This is a great passage to give Abraham, but also to give us a great assurance of what God is doing and what God will do. We're going to look at this chapter through those kind of two angles, I suppose, of this promise that God has given to Abraham previously and that are brought up again in this chapter. There's two angles of people and a place or a nation and an inheritance. So first up, this is verses one to six.

[3 : 39] God will make a people through faith in him. God will make a people through faith in him. One thing to notice as we start here, both of these sections are going to start with who God is. So verse one, you see it there. After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision. Fear not, Abraham. I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great. We can't overstress this enough in these chapters. I'm going to keep on saying it until you are bored of hearing it. But it is God, it is who he is, and it is what he has promised that comes first in this story and in the Christian life. So God begins by reminding Abraham and reminding us that he is all that we need. He is our shield, it says. He is our protector. He and he alone is the one who gives us our great reward. We can have the assurance that these verses are here to give us because it's an assurance based on God's strength and not ours. And yet as we read on,

Abraham asked, well, how is this going to happen? Particularly, how is this promised blessing of a people, a great nation, how is that going to come about? Verse three, and Abraham said, behold, you have given me no offspring and a member of my household will be my heir. So Abraham knows God's promise.

And yet here is the reality. He and his wife are childless. And by this point, they are pretty old. And yet again, God speaks and God kind of clarifies the situation. And throughout these chapters in Genesis, as we go on through the story, it's as if the microscope is kind of focused more and more.

And we get the clarity to what's happening. And God gives this great comfort. He says this in verse four, this man, this kind of member of his household, a member of staff really, shall not be your heir.

Your very own son shall be your heir. And he brought him outside and said, look toward heaven and number the stars if you are able to number them. Then he said to him, so shall your offspring be.

[6 : 00] God gives Abraham this incredible assurance that the fulfillment of this promise he has made is not just certain, but it's going to be beyond what Abraham could even comprehend or imagine. You know, when you go out on a starry night, if you get away from the streetlights and the kind of the light pollution and you get to look up at the sky, just that the scale of the number of stars on a cloudless night. You know, imagine the skies in the time before any kind of artificial lighting where once the sun goes down, it is pitch black. Abraham goes out into this darkness, looks up at the sky and just imagine, imagine the stars that he must have seen. And he's told your offspring will be like that multitude of stars that you do not have a chance, that you do not have a hope of being able to count.

And then that is what we see being fulfilled and worked out through the rest of the Old Testament, the story of Abraham's descendants, the people of Israel, how God blessed them, how God multiplied them into this great nation. We see the evidence of God keeping that promise. But this is a really good chance for us to kind of step back and see even bigger than that, well, how does this promise work forward into the New Testament, that part of the Bible written after the birth of Jesus? What does this promise mean for us as Christians? Now, one of the big things that we're trying to see in this series is how these promises made back in the Old Testament are not over, they don't finish, but these are the same promises that continue and that we live in light of today in the church. So how does this promise to Abraham of offspring figure in that? That might seem like a complicated question, but the heart of it is perhaps most simply explained in a children's song that you may or may not have heard, you may or may not have grown up with. I don't know if you've heard these words before. It says, Father Abraham had many sons, many sons had Father Abraham, and I am one of them, and so are you, so let's all praise the Lord. I don't know if people have heard that song before.

Then it goes on to say, like, shake your arm, wave your leg, nod your head. Those bits are not so much from the Bible. We'll leave those. But Christians being sons and daughters of Abraham, Christians being this promised offspring, that is the teaching of the Bible, of the New Testament. The nation God promised to build, to make through Abraham, is not fulfilled in an earthly nation, is not ultimately defined by hereditary links or ethnicity, but it's the church that is the people that God is building. The apostle Paul calls the church the Israel of God in his letter to the Galatians. The apostle Peter says that the church is a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, all titles used of ethnic Israel in the Old Testament, but here applied to the church as they find their fulfillment, find their truest meaning in the New Testament church. As we see again that the continuity of these promises for us and how the whole Bible fits together with these promises running like a thread, like a kind of stick of Blackpool rock all the way through them.

And well, you might say, well, that's interesting. You might not say that. You might say, well, that helps, I suppose, seeing how the whole Bible fits together. But I suppose the question for all of us is, well, what difference does this really make? What difference does this make tomorrow or the next day or next week or beyond that? I want to say two things in particular from this promise and this passage that make all the difference in the world to us. And the first is how God is making his people. And really here's the key verse in this section. Verse six, after being shown these stars, after being told his offspring will be more than he can count, we read this, and he, that's Abraham, believed the Lord and he counted it to him as righteousness.

That is a key verse in the Bible. That is a verse that's quoted four times in the New Testament. It's a verse that is right at the heart of the gospel of the Christian message. How is this people?

[10 : 53] How are God's people, God's nation to be built? It is built through faith in God and faith in his promises. Abraham, as we said, stands as the father of God's people, father Abraham. And right at the beginning, we see here that's not because Abraham was perfect. It's not because Abraham in himself was righteous. We've already seen in previous chapters, Abraham's mistakes, and there's more still to come.

But we see here it's because Abraham believed in God. He had faith and so was counted as righteous. If you want a kind of the theological term for that, it's called justification by faith alone.

Justification literally means to be declared righteous. We are made right with God because that faith in God's promises is counted for righteousness.

We see here from Abraham that's always been the case. And that's why the apostle Paul will quote this verse in Romans chapter four. He quotes it twice, in fact. He's making the point that right from the start, it has always been faith that has been the key for making people right with God and making them, welcoming them in to be his people.

And as the Bible unfolds, we see that the object of that faith is Jesus. Again, that idea of the microscope being focused ever more clearly, we see that it is faith in Jesus's perfect life of righteousness lived in our place. It is faith in Jesus's sacrificial death that takes the punishment that we deserve. It is faith in his promise of forgiveness and welcome for all those who turn to him. It is that faith in Jesus, which is what makes us right with God, that we are declared righteous, not because we in ourselves are righteous. None of us are. We mess up time and time again, don't we? We know that. But we are justified by faith. And Paul's point in Romans is to say that that is not some huge change. You know, as we've said, the New Testament and the coming of Jesus doesn't kind of scrap the old and start again. No, it has been like that from the very beginning.

[13 : 19] Now, what does that mean to us? It means that anything other than faith that we think we are bringing to the table in terms of making ourselves right with God, that we are mistaken.

Our good works are not going to make us right with God. Our baptism is not going to make us right with God. Our church attendance and involvement is not going to make us right with God. All of those things are good things, important things. But if we think they are what's going to earn God's favor, then we've got everything back to front. God has always been building his people through faith.

Or perhaps if you're here this morning and you wouldn't really say that you are a Christian yet, or you're not really sure, well, really, this is the key. So don't sit and think, well, I'm not really from a Christian background. I'm not sure if this could be for me. This isn't my kind of tradition.

Don't think that you would have to clean up your act first before you could come to God. Don't think, well, God wouldn't be interested in me because there's too many things I've done wrong. I've kind of burnt my bridges already. Or alternatively, certainly don't think, well, I don't really need Jesus or forgiveness because I'm a pretty good person. So I'm kind of probably one of God's people anyway. I know the Bible is so clear from beginning to end that the only thing you need, the very first step and the thing that everyone needs is to turn to Jesus in faith. And that faith makes us his forever. And that faith brings us into this people that God is building. So that's the first so what.

We see how God makes his people. It's justification by faith. The other takeaway here is the assurance that God will make his people. As we said, this is a passage about assurance, encouragement, confidence, assurance for Abraham, but also for us as well. And so if we think of the church as the fulfillment of these promises, then it's easy to ask those questions, isn't it? Is God really going to build his church?

[15 : 25] You know, is God's side really going to be the winning side, as it were, the church as a whole? It's good to be honest, can often feel kind of underwhelming. We hear about decline in church attendance.

We see churches closing. We think so many of our friends seem kind of uninterested in Christian things, although that might be less true than we assume. But if we're honest with ourselves, humanly speaking, it's kind of easy to kind of picture the church just declining and declining until poof, you know, one day it disappears. Actually, I suppose, humanly speaking, that's a fairly limited view of things because actually there are more Christians around the world today than at any point in history. God is continuing to work out his promises. It's just not as many of those Christians live here in Scotland as they used to. But more significantly than that, theologically speaking, we can know that won't happen, that disappearance will not come about because God has promised he will make a people through faith in Jesus. And we might be tempted like Adam to say, really? Is that really going to happen? But God gives us this reassurance that will happen because he will make it happen.

It will happen because people around the world will keep on turning to Jesus in faith as God builds his kingdom. And so we should expect to see that around us. And we should rejoice that we are part of that. This message, this passage encourages us, God will make a people through faith as the fulfillment of his promise to Abraham. We are part of that. The church is the embodiment of that. We're part of it only through faith in Jesus. And we can be reassured and encouraged that God will continue to build, to sustain, to protect, to grow his people. He will do that through bringing them to faith in Jesus. And so that's the first half. God will make a people through faith in him. Secondly, verse 7 onwards, God will give a place through his covenant faithfulness. And so here's the second element of that promise. The promise of land here becomes the focus. God will give a place through his covenant faithfulness. Again, notice that kind of similar pattern to the first section. It begins with God, verse 7, I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the

Chaldeans to give you this land to possess. Abraham then asks his question, asks for that assurance. Verse 8, O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it? And then God provides this confirmation, this assurance that he'll do as he's promised in giving this land. As assurance comes in two parts. First, God speaks to Abraham in verses 13 down to 16. Do have a look down at those verses and see that we see here God speaks about the hardship that they'll face as slaves. They'll be slaves in Egypt for 400 years. He speaks then about the rescue that he will carry out. We see both of those in Exodus, the second book of the Bible.

And then God affirms that he will bring them back to this place. Later on, verse 18, to your offspring, I will give this land. We would see that in Joshua and Judges books later on in the Bible. But we see here, before the event, God outlines the process. It's not immediate. And he's really clear that there will be hardships. There will be suffering on the journey. But it's for certain that this offspring promised to Abraham will possess this land promised to Abraham, this place that God has promised. And then God confirms this promise, makes this covenant with this kind of strange ceremony that we read about. This is probably the bit that you've mainly been interested in and waiting for once we read that passage.

[19 : 41] God's command, Abraham gets these animals, a heifer, goat, ram, turtle dove, pigeon. Most of them are kind of cut, literally sawn in half and laid opposite each other, leaving this kind of grisly pathway down the middle. And then in verse 17, once the sun's gone down, this smoking fire pot and this flaming torch passed between these butchered animal pieces. What's going on here? Commentators suggest a couple of different ideas, although they all really point in the same direction. That as it says in verse 18, this is God making his covenant, his unbreakable relational promise with Abraham that he will give this land to his descendants. I think more precisely what's happening is that in this context, the ancient Near East, when covenants or agreements were made between people, they would do some kind of fairly gory things. And the idea really was to say, may this happen to you or me if either of us don't keep our side of the deal. So imagine you buy a new kind of couch

DFS on some finance arrangement and then you and the shop assistant have to walk over this path of blood and guts. And it's like, may this happen to me if I don't keep up the repayments. May this happen to you if you don't honor the warranty, if that's required. You know, that would bring a degree of seriousness and solemnity to that couch, wouldn't it? You would take that seriously. Well, God here is using the customs of the day to say that as long as he lives, he will not break this promise. He is taking it seriously.

And yet notice this as well, that while in the ancient customs, both parties walk back and forward, here it is only God represented by the fire pot and the flaming torch. It is only God who passes between the pieces.

And what's Abraham doing? Well, we'll have a look at verse 12. Abraham's asleep. Abraham's kind of entirely passive in this arrangement. And the point again, it is clear. It's that same point we've seen repeatedly that it is God who will do this for Abraham. It is God who will achieve this. This is not a partnership where both parties are going to be pulling their weight. No, God will graciously fulfill his promise to give the land, to give a place to Abraham's descendants. He instigates it.

He commits to it. He will complete it. He makes this covenant to give Abraham that assurance. And again, to understand that the significance of this passage for us, and this is a huge theme throughout the Old Testament and a question of ongoing kind of political significance to us, but what we really need to understand, what is the significance to us as New Testament Christians, as the church, of this promise of land to Abraham and his descendants? Descendants, as we've said, remember, that we are a part of. Throughout the Bible, this concept of a place for God's people to call home is something of huge significance. And it's really important for us to see the fulfillment of this promise as it reaches into the New Testament. As it continues today, it is not a geographical place.

[23 : 19] We mentioned this briefly a couple of weeks ago. Happy to chat more if people would like, but the current disputes over land in the Middle East do not and will not define whether God is keeping this promise or not. Because the fulfillment of this land, of this place, is a spiritual home for God's people.

Again, in 1 Peter, we saw this last year, where it begins saying that we have an inheritance. That word inheritance is a word used a lot about the land in the Old Testament. It says, we have this inheritance kept in heaven for us. Or another book in the New Testament, the book of Hebrews.

The author of that letter speaks about Abraham and his faith, what he was looking forward to in God's promises. It says, he desired a better country that is a heavenly one.

Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. The very final book of the Bible, Revelation, the penultimate chapter, we see this picture of this city coming down, the new creation, where God will dwell with his people, where God's people will have their true home in perfection forever, this true spiritual home, which doesn't mean, by the way, it's not also physical. The new creation is a physical thing.

But the emphasis is that this is something that God will do. This is not something to be claimed on this earth in the present. There is something far, far better in store for God's people.

[25 : 07] And this passage here is to give us that assurance that however it looks, however unlikely, or despite the suffering and the pain that we might go through on the way there, just as God says here in these verses, that the Israelites will go through before they reach the promised land, that time of slavery and suffering.

But even in the midst of that, we can be certain that God will bring us to this place, which will be our eternal home. He has covenanted himself to us, promising that he will do that.

And again, this is all ultimately focusing on building toward the work of Jesus. We can be assured of this promise of a place, an eternal place, as God's people, because Jesus dies on the cross for us, that we might be forgiven.

Jesus dies on the cross to fulfill those covenant promises. That as we see in Genesis chapter 15 and this ritual, that it is God himself and God alone who will fulfill the covenant.

It is God alone who will do everything that is needed for us to be welcomed into the home with him that he has promised, and he is preparing, and he is keeping for us.

[26 : 27] God will give us a place through his covenant faithfulness. So we have an eternal home with God in perfection, the fulfillment of that promise, because Jesus has fulfilled the covenant for us.

That means whatever struggles we're going through at the moment, that means whatever is going on in our life, which is hard, that means in those times when we just ache because things are not as they should be, we can look to God and his certain promises and know that he will bring us to that eternal home where all of those struggles will be no more.

Like Abraham, we often have questions in this life. Is God really going to build his people, the church? It doesn't always feel that way.

Is God really going to give us a place, an eternal home, a perfection dwelling with him? Often that feels a long, long way away, especially as we walk through the struggles of life.

And yet this chapter is here to give us assurance that God is the same as he has always been. God will keep his promises. God will make a people through faith in him.

[27 : 39] He is doing that and will continue to do so. God will give a place through his covenant faithfulness, a new creation where we will be with him.

That faith is faith in Jesus. That faithfulness is fulfilled in Jesus. And so like Abraham, we are invited to go through life, the life of faith, but go through the life of faith with confidence and assurance in God that he will keep his promises to us.

He has done that in Jesus Christ and he will see us into our eternal home. Let's pray. Amen. Heavenly Father, once again, we come to you to give you thanks and praise that you are the God who has made great promises to us and that you are the God who keeps your promises.

Lord, we thank you for Jesus. We recognize our complete dependence upon him because in Jesus, in the gospel, you have fulfilled the covenant, you have made with your people.

And we thank you that through faith in Jesus, through trusting in that gospel, we can be brought in to be part of your people, part of this great nation that you promised all those years ago and which you continue to build this very day as people come to put their trust in Christ.

[29 : 09] And we thank you that through him as we are brought to be your people, we can also look forward to that eternal and perfect place you have secured for us. That one day Jesus will return, there will be a restored creation, and we will enjoy our perfect home in your presence.

Lord, these are our big things. These are our big concepts that we're talking about. These are things that perhaps can so often seem detached from our day-to-day lives.

But we pray that as we've been thinking about them, as we continue to do so, that they would give us confidence to live our lives fully committed to you. And they would give us that real assurance that whatever this world throws at us, we are yours now and forever if our trust is in Jesus.

And we thank you that the fulfillment of these promises in the gospel is the very best news there is because it is eternal hope and joy and peace. And we pray that we would be able to worship you in every aspect of our lives in thankful praise and adoration.

And that we would be eager to share that good news with those around us. Because it's not something that we've done or earned or achieved, but it's from your grace and your goodness to us.

[30 : 30] And we pray all these things in Jesus Christ, the one in whom our faith is based and the one who is the fulfillment of your faithfulness to us. I pray that in Jesus' name.

Amen.