

A Promise Is A Promise. by Jeff Strite

Genesis 12:1-12:4

OPEN: When you and I were children, there was a saying we'd often hear. I'm going to say the first half of the saying and let's see if you know the 2nd half:

"Cross my heart and (hope to die)"

What was that child saying?

They were saying they'd made a promise, and if they were to break that promise they would expect something bad to happen.

Actually, the original phrase is a little longer:

"Cross my heart and hope to die. Stick a needle in my eye."

The only thing kids could think of that was worse than dying was sticking needles in their eyes - and I would tend to agree. Kids understand the importance of promises. In fact parents have learned that they need to be very careful what promises they make to their kids. As my kids were growing up I learned that if I told them that...

- I was going to do something for them
- I was going to take them someplace
- I was going get something for them.

and then (for whatever reason) I didn't do that, you know what they'd say to me?

BUT YOU PROMISED!

As children we learned that promises are were important and needed to be kept. God understands that and so He has repeatedly told us throughout the Bible that if He makes a promise He'll keep it. And in the Bible one of the most significant kind of promises God made were called "Covenants".

A covenant was the kind of promise that God made with Abram (renamed Abraham). God promised Abraham that if left his home and took his family to a place God would show him THEN God would then bless Him in several significant ways.

There are some people who think that Old Testament covenants are like our modern day contracts. And that's kind of true... but covenants were like contracts on steroids: Back in Bible days folks talked about "cutting a covenant". If you "cut a covenant" with someone, you'd go through an elaborate ceremony where you'd cut an animal in two... and the parts were placed a few feet apart creating a path between the pieces of the dead animal.

Then the parties to the covenant would walk between those dead parts. They were essentially declaring: "May I be like this dead animal if I ever break this covenant."

Genesis 15 describes how God "cut" His covenant with Abram:

"... the LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon." Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other....

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch (representing God) appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram"

(Genesis 15:9-10 and 17-18a)

God was declaring to Abram... may I be like these animals if I ever break my promise. It was God's way of saying: "Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye" except God's covenant with Abraham wasn't child's play... it was a deadly serious vow. It was God's way of saying: I WILL keep this promise.

Now this is important for us for two reasons:

1st – Whenever God makes a promise... He intends to keep it. Covenants were God's way of dramatically driving home how serious His promises were, and how committed God is to fulfilling what He's promised.

Isaiah 46:11 says "What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do."

In other words: "If I said it – I WILL do it!"

And in 2 Corinthians 1:20 Paul tells us "...no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God."

God will keep his promises!

And His promises here in Genesis 12 were exciting to Abraham... and should be exciting to us because Abraham was a man who wasn't all that different from us. Think about it: Abraham is a 75 year old man.

Seventy-five years old, and Scripture says little about anything he'd done all during those 75 years! He's not known as

o a great warrior,

o or a great theologian

o and he's apparently not much of a writer because there are NO Bible books written by him.

And yet Abraham was one of the greatest men in the Old Testament. Only Jesus (and maybe Moses) are more highly regarded in Scripture than he is. But what did Abraham do that was worthy of such importance?

Well, the answer is right here in Genesis 12:1

"The LORD had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.'"

That's it.

God asked him to pack up his tent and go a place he'd never been and so, Abram packed up his tent, puts his wife on the camel and off he goes.

Hebrews 11:8-10 tells us that "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the Promised Land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

THAT... IS... IT!!!

God says move, and he moves.

Doesn't sound particularly impressive to me.

And yet God sets Abraham up to be one of the major heroes in Scripture.

Because he moved.

What's so impressive about that?

What was impressive was that Abraham was a man who believed God.

He trusted God.

He had faith in God.

Romans 4:9 tells us that "... Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness."

Now, THAT should excite us!!! And the reason that should excite us is because that means:

... we don't have to be important in this world for God to want to use us

... we don't have to have an impressive resume for God to want to work in our lives
... we don't have to be strong or smart or rich or powerful.
All we have to do is TRUST GOD. Believe in God. Have Faith in God

2 Chronicles 16:9 says "For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him..." (NKJV)

All God wants to know is:

Do you trust Him enough to let Him work in your life!

Will you let Him lead you where He wants you to go?

Will you let Him remake you and rework you so that He can use you?

ILLUS: My brother Jack recently retired as one of the CEOs at a prominent airplane engine manufacturer on the East Coast. They hired him years ago when he graduated from Purdue University. But when they hired him - they told him something like this: "We're glad you graduated from Purdue. It proves you're a responsible and committed young man. But you may as well know – there's nothing they've taught you that will help us. We're going to have to retrain you with the skills you'll need here."

Jack had gone to Purdue for 4 years. He'd studied hard, faithfully attended all of his classes. And yet virtually nothing he learned there mattered.

In the same way – it doesn't matter what strengths you think you have. It doesn't matter how skilled, clever, rich, or powerful you are. Those things don't impress God. God isn't looking at your resume. He's looking at whether or not He can trust you to do what He wants done and go where He wants to you go.

All God wants to know is: If He asks you to do something will you do it? Do you trust Him enough to go where He sends you and do what He asks?

So, the 1st thing God's covenant with Abram should teach us is:

If God makes a promise we can TRUST Him to keep it.

FAITH is when we TRUST God to do exactly what He's promised.

ILLUS: I was at Saturday morning prayer breakfast yesterday when I accidentally stumbled on a verse in Romans 4 I'd not seen before: "(Abraham was) fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why 'it was credited to him as righteousness.'" (Romans 4:21-22)

Abraham believed God had the power to do what He'd promised.

That's what it is all about: Do I believe that God deliver on His promises?

In fact, that's exactly what Hebrews 11:6 says "without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

Faith is believing that God will do what He's promised you He will do!

The 2nd thing we can learn from this promise in Genesis 12 is this:

This covenant with Abraham is THE covenant of the Bible. All the other promises and covenants of Scripture seem to hinge upon this guarantee God made to him.

For example, God promised Abraham:

"I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you" Genesis 12:3a (NKJV)

God was telling Abram: I'll take care of you. People will curse you and people will bless you... but I've got your back.

I heard one Bible college professor say that this promise was ONLY for Abraham. That puzzled me, and so I did a little Bible study and I discovered: that professor was wrong.

For example, Jesus said: "if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."

(Matthew 10:42)

In other words: I will bless those who bless you.

Paul wrote: "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you." (2 Thessalonians 1:6)

In other words: God will curse those who curse you.

God will bless those who bless YOU and He'll curse those who curse YOU. You and I have the same promise Abraham did because this is a promise God has made to all. The promise was made to Abraham because God knew he would experience trouble in this world and God wanted to drive home that He loved this man so much that He would protect him. And Jesus tells us Christians that "in this world you will have trouble. But take heart because I have overcome the world."

Same promise, same God.

God makes this promise to us because we (like Abraham) are now "covenant people".

We are people God has made His promises to.

But why? Why are we a covenant people?

What makes us so special that God would make us promises like those He made to Abraham?

Because of Jesus.

It's only by the blood of Jesus that we have any promises from God. And this goes to the heart of what I want to tell you this morning. The promises God made to Abraham in Genesis... pointed ultimately to Jesus.

That is what Paul wrote in Galatians 3:16

"The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say 'and to seeds,' meaning many people, but 'and to your seed,' meaning one person, who is Christ."

Abraham was chosen by God to be the beginning of a long line of descendants that ultimately led to Jesus. Matthew 1 starts out:

"A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of ABRAHAM: ABRAHAM was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers" Matthew 1:1-2

God began Christ's genealogy in Matthew with Abraham. And one of the reasons God did this was so He could set up a "paper trail" for Christ. It was a paper trail that began with Abraham, but was re-emphasized over and over again to Christ's mortal ancestors. If you were to research the lives of the people who were part Jesus' ancestry in Matthew, you'd find that – over and over again - God promised several of them that the promised Messiah was coming through their lineage. It was a deliberate paper trail.

Now, why would that be important?

ILLUS: Well, about 500 years or so before Christ a man named Siddhartha was born. We know him better as "Buddha". Centuries before Buddha was born, nobody had ever said "someone like Buddha is coming". Nobody ever prophesied that a man like Buddha would live and teach and die as he did. And nobody ever said "these will be his parents" or his grandparents or his great-grandparents. Buddha just popped in history and taught the things he taught, and became the founder of one of the world's "great" religions.

About 500 years or so AFTER Christ a man named Mohammed was born. Centuries

before Mohammed was born, nobody had ever said “someone like Mohammed is coming”. Nobody ever prophesied that a man like Mohammed would live and teach and die as he did. And nobody ever said “these will be his parents” or his grandparents or his great-grandparents. Mohammed just popped in history and taught the things he taught, and became the founder of one of the world’s “great” religions.

But, by contrast, when Jesus was born there had already been centuries of prophecy about how He would live and teach and die... and be rise from the dead. And Abraham became the lynch pin of a long line of descendants that ultimately led to Christ. That long line of descendants is one major proof that God had planned this all out. It was God’s paper trail proving that Jesus wasn’t just another world religious leader. He was the one sent by God.

Now, one more thing:

The promise given Abraham did not just point to the coming of Jesus... God’s promise to him pointed to the foundation of what Jesus came to do.

In Matthew 1 God makes the genealogy of Christ START with Abraham.

Now, why not go back to Adam? After all, he was the first man.

Or, why not go back to Noah or one of his sons? They restarted the human race after the flood.

But no. God kicks off Christ’s genealogy with Abraham. God picks up a man born about 300 years after Noah dies!

WHY???

Because Abraham did NOTHING to deserve God’s promises. Abraham was NOT chosen because he was a great writer, or a great soldier, or a prominent theologian, or a powerful leader.

There was only one reason God chose Abraham: “... Abraham’s faith was credited to him as righteousness.” (Romans 4:9) Abraham was chosen because he was willing to TRUST God.

And it was his willingness to believe God’s promises that made him impressive to God.

God made Abraham the central focus of his promises because He wanted us to realize that – centuries later - Jesus would NOT save us because of WHO we were or WHAT we’d done. Jesus would ONLY save us because of WHAT we believed.

Jesus did not come to save the righteous, but the lost. He came to heal the sick not the ones who thought they were well.

Romans 4:13 says “It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring RECEIVED THE PROMISE that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes BY FAITH.

Abraham was important to God because his ONLY claim to fame was his faith in God’s promise.

You see, too many people get the impression that God will be impressed with THEM. They believe God will accept them because they’re pretty nice people. Or, even if they haven’t ALWAYS been nice, at least God will accept them because they’ve done more good than evil in their lives. They believe that if they can just do more good than bad in their lives, they can balance out the scales and make it so they can come before God with enough on the “good side” of the scales so that He won’t be able to keep them out of heaven. If they can just get that done, they believe God will not keep be able to keep them out heaven, because their own “self-righteousness” has bought them a place in eternity.

But God says: Doesn’t work that way!

God was going to save us “... not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior” Titus 3:5-6

The only way you and I will ever make it into heaven will be by the promise of the blood of Jesus. I want you to stand with me now and sing this great hymn of faith:

“Standing on the promises of Christ my King, through eternal ages let his praises ring;
Glory in the highest, I will shout and sing, standing on the promises of God.
Standing, standing, standing on the promises of Christ my Savior;
Standing, standing, I’m standing on the promises of God.”

We stand only by the promise of salvation through Jesus.

Centuries ago, 1000s of Jews stood outside the Temple courts and heard a man named Peter confront them about their sins. His sermon was so convicting that they asked “Men and brethren what shall we do?” And Peter replied:

"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. THE PROMISE is for you and your children and for all who are far off— for all whom the Lord our God will call."

(Acts 2:38-39)