

Help My Unbelief

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[0:00] Genesis 15. Then the word of the Lord came to him.

This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir. He took him outside and said, look up at the heavens and count the stars, if indeed you can count them. Then he said to him, so shall your offspring be. See, Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.

He also said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it. But Abram said, oh, sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?

So 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.

[1:32] Birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.

Then the Lord said to him, know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country, not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated 400 years.

But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves. And afterward, they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age.

In the fourth generation, your descendants will come back here for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure. When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, To your descendants, I give this land from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites.

[3:01] That was a lovely hymn. I haven't sung it in a while. And it reminds me that children, children God once called a little boy to know him, to love him.

There's not an age limit on God's grace. My life seems to be one long battle to really believe the gospel, to believe the goodness of the gospel, the goodness of God, to believe his promises.

Not believing it up here. I think everything is just fine as far as believing it up there goes. But to really know it here in my heart, to really be convinced, to feel it, to experience it in such a way that my life, my day is changed by it.

Jesus is the fruitful vine. And I want to dwell in him and find strength in him in every situation to say, Jesus, you're what I need.

You're what I need in the next five minutes. You're what I need today. Not living in my own strength, but in his mighty strength. Ephesians 6.10, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

[4:26] Not to be resting in my weakness, but in his strength. I want that. I need that. Isn't that true for you, brother?

Isn't that true for you, sister? I'm not alone in this. Perhaps maybe you haven't realized, but that's the big fight of the Christian faith. That's your real desire to, isn't it?

But it's a battle. It's not the easiest thing. We have to be always stirring up our faith, asking for help, saying, Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief.

And tonight we see Abraham wrestling through that same battle. Last time we saw God underneath the stars with Abraham. And you remember what happened.

Abraham believed and he credited it to him as righteousness. God gave righteousness to Abraham when he simply believed God's promise.

[5:30] So verse 6 of Genesis 15 is a high point. It's a high point of the Old Testament. It's a high point of the whole Bible story. But is that it?

They all lived happily ever after. Is everything all better now? Is everything perfect? And the answer is no. Abraham still has to live. He still has to go on in this.

And the just shall live by faith. We get new life by faith. When we're joined to Jesus, we get new life. And ongoing, we live by faith.

So now Abraham faces a challenge, a battle, a struggle. The same problem, the same struggle, the same challenge that I face, that you face.

Lord, I need you to strengthen my faith. I need you to help me. So look at verses 7 and 8. This is on the end of verse 6.

[6:31] 7 and 8. He also said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it. But Abraham said, O sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?

Abraham's question is not a question of doubt. He's saying, Lord, help me to know it. God's promises can be very slippery.

Not because they themselves are not solid, but they easily slip away from us. They slip into a world of not being real and not being vivid. And so he's saying, Lord, help me to hold on.

How can I really know that I will receive it? When the angel visited Mary, you remember, she said, How can this be since I'm a virgin?

She wasn't doubting. She was asking for and looking for confirmation to really to know it, to understand how this could be. And that isn't something that the Lord scorns or frowns upon.

[7:42] He helped Mary. He helped Abraham when he said, Lord, how can I know it? And when you're in the battle of faith, which we all are, he will help you.

And the way he helped Abraham, the way he helped Abraham, is the way that he helps you. And so if you struggle with faith, like I do, where things become not so vivid and God and the gospel kind of blur, and we don't see how they connect to where I am, it seems murky and half real.

Listen to how God helped Abraham. So I want to look at this passage, the remainder of it, under three questions. We're not going to go verse by verse. And so we're just going to look at it topically under these three questions.

And question number one is, what is God promising? What is God promising? And how you answer this question makes all the difference whether this has something to do with you, whether it applies to us as we're sitting here, or whether it doesn't.

Is God only promising Abraham literal, physical, land, descendants, and blessings? If so, then this promise really has very little to do with us.

[9:02] It has really little to do with you. It's a history lesson that doesn't really connect to your life. And so what is God promising?

And here's the point blank answer. God is promising the gospel in a shadow, under a shadow, in a shadowy, not yet fully revealed way.

He's promising him the gospel. But don't take my word for it. Let's look at what the Bible says. And so we're going to walk through some of the scriptures today.

Turn to Acts chapter 26. Acts 26 verse 6. Acts 26.6. Paul is on trial before Agrippa.

Listen to what he says. So why was Paul on trial?

[10:19] Why were the Jews accusing him? Well, it was because of the gospel. He was preaching Christ, crucified, and raised from the dead, raised for our sins.

But Paul doesn't say that. He says, I'm on trial because I believe in what God has promised to our fathers. To Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob.

Now, in Paul's mind, what God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those promises came to fulfillment in the gospel.

In the story of Jesus saving sinners through his life, death, and resurrection. Turn to Ephesians chapter 2. Ephesians chapter 2 and verse 11.

Now, Paul is writing to the Ephesian church.

[11:22] They're primarily Gentile. And so he says in verse 11, Therefore, remember that formerly, that is, before you believed the gospel, formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called uncircumcised by those who call themselves the circumcision, that done in the body by hands of men, remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel,

and foreigners to the covenants of promise.

So, where were they? Who were they? What were they before? They were separate from Christ. They weren't citizens of Israel. They were excluded from Israel.

And they were foreigners. That means they were aliens, strangers. They had no part in the covenants of promise. The covenants of promise. That, in part, at least, is talking about what God promised and covenanted to Abraham in Genesis 15.

He said, When you Gentiles came to Christ, you stopped being foreigners to those promises. You came into the promise of God.

Now, the Ephesian church didn't literally become children of Israel, or children of Abraham. They didn't move to Palestine. They didn't change their location.

[12:54] They didn't get, you know, their genealogy didn't change. The gospel was applied to them. Their sins were forgiven. They were made right with God.

They became God's people. And so it says, In Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

The covenants of promise came true in Jesus. They were fulfilled through the death and resurrection of Christ. And so what is God promising to Abraham in Genesis 15?

It's nothing less than the gospel. Galatians 3. Let me just, I'll read this. Galatians 3, verses 6 through 9.

And again, Paul's writing to Gentile Christians. And he says, Consider Abraham. He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

[13:52] Understand then that those who believe are children of Abraham. So who are the promised descendants of Abraham? It's those who believe the gospel of justification by faith alone through Christ alone.

And then he goes on. The scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham. All nations will be blessed through you. So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

And so God promised to Abraham, all nations will be blessed through you. And what is that blessing? What does God have in mind?

What did God mean? He meant that they would be justified. That their relationship with God would be put right, would be restored. They would be right with him.

That's what God is promising to Abraham. And so, do you see, Genesis 15 has everything to do with you. Has everything to do with you.

[14:55] God is announcing the gospel to Abraham in advance. Now, I don't want to beat a dead horse, but you have to understand that the Bible hangs together.

That it has one central message. All of the promises are yes in Christ. And so God isn't schizophrenic, promising different things to different people.

From the very beginning, God was saying, look to Christ. Believe in him. Turn to Romans chapter 4, verse 13.

Romans 4, 13. The question in Romans 4 is, how was Abraham justified?

What did Abraham find in this matter? Discover in this matter. How was he justified? It wasn't through works. It wasn't through being circumcised.

[15:52] It wasn't through obeying the law. Look at verse 13. It was not through the 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.

For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless. Now, did you see what Paul did? He took the promise of the land, that you'll receive this land, and he expanded it.

He stretched it to the whole world. He would be heir of the world. God was promising more than just Palestine.

He was promising new heavens and a new earth, the home of the righteous. It was under a shadow. It was murky and unclear, but it was there.

That was the heart of the message, the kernel of the promise. And that's why in Hebrews 11, it says, speaking of Abraham, for he was looking forward to a city with foundations whose architect and builder was God.

[17:01] And they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one. Abraham's faith went past the visible land, and it reached out for heaven.

So what was God promising? He was promising the gospel to Abraham. He's promising life and righteousness and forgiveness and heaven and fellowship through Jesus Christ.

And that makes all the difference how you read Genesis 15. Because it's for you. And what follows is for you.

We started by saying, we struggle to believe. We are always needing to make this vivid to ourselves. We need God's help.

And it's this long battle to be convinced, is to know in the depths of our heart. Not so much that it's true, but that it's true, that it has power and meaning for my life now, that it connects to me now, that we're convinced.

[18:14] And so Abraham is wrestling with that here. And how does God help him? He gives him the gospel again. He speaks the promise again.

And then he makes a covenant. And that brings us to our second question. Who will do it? Who will do it? Who will make sure that all of these promises come to pass?

Who's guaranteeing it? Who will perform it? Who will bring it about? And the answer is God. God alone. God all by himself without Abraham's help.

God all by himself without your help. Without your works. Without your power. Your strength. It's going to be all of grace.

It's going to be God's unmerited favor. And you see that by what God does next. Abraham says, how can I know? And God says in verse 9, bring me a heifer.

[19:16] Oh sorry, we're going back to Genesis 15. Genesis 15. Verse 9. God says, bring me a heifer, a goat, a ram, along with a dove and a young pigeon.

And so Abraham brings them. And he cuts them in two. Except for the birds. And he waits.

And he waits. And some wild birds, some vultures, something like that, come down. And he drives them away and he waits. And in a great darkness comes over him and he falls asleep.

And God comes and in the form of a smoking fire pot and a blazing torch, God goes through these pieces. Well, what's going on here?

Well, Abraham was a man of his time. Just like you are. He was a man of his time. And at that time, that was how a covenant was made. Covenant's a solemn promise that binds people together.

[20:23] It forms and creates a relationship. And that is how you made a solemn promise and you bound yourself to someone. That's how you did it at that time.

You literally cut a covenant. You cut animals and you walked between them. So you got some animals. You cut them in two. And usually what would happen is both people would walk through the animals.

And what you were saying is, if I don't do what I have promised, let me be like those animals. Let that happen to me. Let me be cut in two.

Let me die. And so you bound yourself with a curse. You said, let me be cursed if I don't do what I say I'm going to do.

Now, that kind of taking upon yourself a curse was very normal in the ancient world. In ancient England, when making a covenant, the two parties would say, may the earth open and swallow me.

[21:29] May the sky fall upon me. May the sea rise and cover me. May fires consume me if I am forsworn. That is, if I break my oath.

Let the skies come down. Let the seas go up. Let me be burned up. You're basically binding yourself with a curse. Now, the question is, who's going to keep the promise in Genesis 15?

Who's going to make sure that this comes about, that it gets done? And the answer is God alone. And you can see it, look at verse 12.

Really, look at it. Let me ask you, when the covenant is being made, what is Abraham doing? He's asleep. When the covenant is being made, Abraham is sleeping. God appears to him in a dream and in a vision. So he's lying there in the dark and God comes to him in this vision.

[22:41] And so, remember last time we said Abraham, with God under the stars, with Abraham and God was crediting it to him with righteousness. What would have you seen Abraham doing?

And the answer is nothing. He was just looking and believing. And now, as the promise is confirmed, what is Abraham doing?

What would have you seen? He would have seen a man asleep with the visible eyes. Now, doesn't that tell you about, tell you something about who is going to bring the gospel about? Who's going to make it happen? who saves? It's God. It's God alone. So when God finds us, we're not just asleep, we're dead in our sins.

We have nothing to contribute. We have nothing that we can do because we are powerless, dead in our sins. And he comes and he rescues us.

[23 : 44] Salvation is of God's initiative. God does it. Salvation belongs to him. And so, who's going to do it? Who is it up to? Well, it's answered partly there, but then it's also who walks through the animals?

Who takes the curse on himself? Well, it's God alone. Abraham never gets up and walks through the animals. He comes so God calls down a curse of death upon himself if he doesn't do what he says he's going to do.

So, brothers and sisters, how serious is God about saving his people, about doing what he says, about bringing about this promise, about saving and blessing you?

he's deadly serious. He says, if I don't do it, then let me die. If I don't fulfill it, let me be killed.

Let me be cut in two. But this is more than just words. We have to see that this is more than just theoretical. God isn't just speaking in hyperbole. He's not saying, oh, I'll do it and it's never really even a possibility because what did God do to save you?

[25 : 01] Well, the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, he became man and the God-man died.

And, in that sense, God died. God took upon himself the curse of sin. Now, to die is not to blink out of existence.

It's not to stop existing. God never stopped existing. Jesus didn't stop being God even for a second. He is absolutely immortal in that sense. But, death doesn't even mean blinking out of existence for us.

It means to bear the curse of sin. It means to bear the penalty of sin. The wages of sin is death. And so, when Jesus, the God-man, paid for sin, he paid with death.

he died under the curse of sin. And so, on the cross, when Jesus Christ, the Son of God, both God and man, came to rescue us, he came to fulfill the promises made to Abraham, he took upon the curse.

[26 : 14] He took the curse upon himself. And the full wrath of God crushed him. And his body was broken for me. And he was torn in two, like the temple curtain was torn in two, and like these animals were torn in two.

And Jesus died a bloody death under the curse of sin. And all so that his people could be forgiven, could be right with God, could enjoy heaven, could enjoy fellowship, so that the promises first made to Abraham could come to all of God's people.

And so, in Genesis 15, God promises the gospel, and he guarantees the gospel. He guarantees it with his life.

And when it came time for Jesus to die, he laid down his life. So who is going to do it? It's God alone.

Now finally, the third question. What should you take away from this passage? What should you take away from this passage? What should we learn?

[27 : 25] First, and we've been saying this, that the gospel is God's doing. The gospel is God's doing. He says, I'll do it, and I'll do what I've said.

The gospel doesn't depend upon me in the least, on my record, on what I can do, on what I provide, on what you can do. It's a free gift.

But, Abraham didn't do anything to earn it. He was an ordinary man, a sinner like you. He didn't do anything to deserve these promises.

He didn't do anything to deserve this kind of favor, and this kind of love, and this kind of attention from God. He received it by faith. God made a covenant with him to do him good.

And Abraham had nothing to do with bringing it about, or making sure that it got done. And so, we're all hell-deserving sinners. We all deserve hell.

[28 : 23] The wages of sin is death, and we are sinners. The youngest person here is a lawbreaker, is lawless, is a rebel, stiff-necked, we saw this morning, just like Abraham.

But the gospel comes to us. God in the gospel comes to us with mercy and grace, and he says, he doesn't say, now do this and fix yourself and clean yourself up, change this and change that, and then maybe I'll have mercy on you.

He says, believe what I've promised. Believe in what I've done. I've promised to poor sinners. And he says, repent. Turn away from your sin. Repent from that way of life and turn to me.

And even repentance is a response to the gospel. Repentance is not you preparing yourself to receive God's mercy. It's not you preparing yourself for it.

It's a response to God's mercy. The shorter catechism asks, what is repentance unto life? What is saving repentance?

[29 : 27] And it answers it this way. Repentance unto life is a saving grace. It's a saving grace. It comes from God. Whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of sin and apprehension that is seen and understanding the mercy of God in Christ does with grief and hatred of his sin turn from it unto God.

Repentance isn't cleaning yourself up so that God will have mercy on you. It's a response to God's mercy. It's a response to his promise. And so in Genesis 15 you see the mercy of God towards sinners.

He comes to sinners and he sovereignly says, I'm the Savior. There's none but me. I do it. From the first to the last salvation belongs to the Lord and he's going to do it for those who repent and believe.

Those who receive the promise, those who trust in Christ are the ones who God sovereignly saves. Now secondly, what should you take away from this?

This is the last and it's this, dear believers, you see the importance of God's promises. The importance of God's promises. We started out by saying that this battle is really a battle.

[30 : 50] The Christian life is this battle to believe in the goodness of the gospel and so that we have strength and we're drawing it from Christ hour by hour and day by day to believe that God is for us, to believe that God's laws are good, to believe in the goodness of the gospel, to stop trying to do things in our own strength and to be strong in his mighty power.

Well, how do you fight that battle? Where do you find that kind of strength? How do you live it? Well, it's by believing the promises of God.

Do you see how important they are then? And that makes me ask, what role do the promises of God have in your life? Are they a steady part of your diet?

A steady part of your spiritual diet? Paul says, this life I live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me.

Paul found ongoing strength. That life that he was living that was so magnificent and so full of suffering and glory and that life, he says, I live it by faith.

[32 : 03] And I'm thinking about how Jesus has loved me and he gave himself up for me. And Paul was living in that promised love. Paul found ongoing strength and confirmation by thinking about the gospel promises.

Jesus. And so tomorrow morning, instead of starting your day by saying, and this is what I have a tendency to do, instead of saying, well, I need to do this and I need to do that and I need to do this for God and I need to really be careful not to sin in this way or that way, start by saying, thank you, Jesus, for loving me.

Thank you for my salvation. Thank you for everything I need, I have in you. I need forgiveness, I need strength, I need mercy, I need help.

It's all in you. And thank you for saving me. It's your work from first to last. Give me faith to believe it. God, give me faith to believe your promises when the kids are running around and my world is coming apart and I don't have the patience I need and help me to understand and believe then.

Help me to know it. Know those promises are real. Give me faith to believe that I'm a son of God.

When I'm at work and they're giving me a hard time or when my boss is mean and unfair to me, help me to remember when I have to make that hard phone call that you love me, that you love me so much that you gave your son for me and you poured out his blood for me and if you'll pour out his blood for me, will you not give me everything else?

[33 : 51] Help me to believe that. And when sin comes tempting, help me to remember that Christ died and I died with him so that sin would no longer have dominion over me.

That you died to save me from this present evil age. So instead of starting with your list of things to do and the things that you have planned and your things that you're going to do for God, start with

the gospel.

Start with God's promises. Rest in God's love. And then out of the joy of that Sabbath rest, obey God's law.

Obey his word. Obey his commands. Get up and work with all of your heart. Be strong in his mighty strength and get to work.

Get up and love your Lord who so loved you. Let's pray. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do pray that you would bind our wandering hearts to you.

[35 : 12] Lord, we are so slow to believe your promises. We are so slow to believe the goodness of the gospel, the goodness of your law, that these things are for our good, that you mean well, that behind in your heart there's love for us.

Lord, forgive us for our unbelief. Forgive us for our rebellion and our stiff necks that just keep going in our own strength and in our own way like little children not being willing to be helped.

forgive us for our pride. Thank you for your gospel. Thank you for the word of God that just shows us how great you are, how full of grace you are for sinners like us.

We do take the low place. We confess that we are unworthy and we are wicked and the only good things that we have about us are things that you've given to us.

the only good thing that we have on our record is what you have done for us and the only good works that we have come from Christ and his strength. He is the fruitful vine and he gets all the glory.

[36 : 33] So I pray that we will learn to live upon him. I pray for those who are separate from Christ and there they are dead in their sin.

will you open their eyes and open their hearts to see their great need and to see the greatness of your salvation that you answer every need they have.

And it's all in Jesus Christ. Pray that you would make him more and more precious to us as we live this Christian life. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Amen. Amen.