



Abram's Story is Our Story

Sermon - 30 May 2021 - Aiden Sibrava

Well it's an interesting passage this morning... That last tribe mentioned in the reading is the tribe of Melchizedek. The Jebusites were known for the great fortress of Jebus, which would not be conquered until King David seized it and it became known as Jerusalem. God is promising Abram that his descendant will be greater than the great King Melchizedek...greater than any of the kings Abram has met. But...in the beginning of our passage we meet Abram as a man who believes too little.

In so many ways, Abram's story is our story. This tale of a Mediterranean herdsman might feel foreign and folksy and ancient, but if you pay attention, you'll see our story in his.

He starts out in a funk.

Picture a dejected, embittered old man. He's uprooted his family, and committed his wealth and resources to a great promise. But nothing has come of it. He feels hopeless, resigned... It's hard to think of what a do-over could even mean at this point in his life. You see by now Abram is somewhere between 75 and 85 years old and, although Genesis 25:7 says that he lived to 175 years of age, it still *feels like* at 80 or so he's not a young man. And just like us at times, at this point he's not feeling real

good. In the past we've praised Abram's trust in his God, but check out these first few verses:

15:1 ...the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.'

² But Abram said, 'Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?' ³ 'You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.'

"What can you give me?" I mean... who is Abram talking to? *Is that a real question?* Growing up, my dad used to make big promises. My mum and dad are divorced and she used to call him, "Disneyland Dad". You can make big promises, but making and keeping are different things. You can promise Disneyland all you like, but if there's no follow-through it doesn't mean anything. The crazy thing is that here, Abram is talking to *God* as though God is 'Disneyland Dad'.

"What can you give me?" Abram asks. I mean...*everything*, right!? God the creator can literally give Abram *everything*. But in his bitterness and unbelief, Abram pushes back and says, 'you know you promised the world, but, it's not happening. And it'll all go to his adoptive heir, Eliezer. A favoured steward. The promise of God, over and done in one generation. Even if it *is* a very long generation.

Now...how would God take that? How would **you** take that? Imagine, for argument's sake, you had a good year

of dividends, so you bought a brand new Ford Mustang and you said to your son, “This is yours. Not right now, because I’ve got to get it sorted out, but it’s for you.” Then how would you feel if he turned around and said, “Yeah right, old man; as if! You and I both know if it’s up to you I’ll be driving the same Camry ‘til I cark it.”

It’d be hard to feel good, wouldn’t it? You’re excited to deliver a blessing; you have the means and intent, and it just gets cynically, angrily, bitterly thrown in your face. *What a slap!* That’s what Abram did to God—but over something far, far bigger.

So how would God react?

Well, I’m expecting anger and outrage. And lightning and flashes of thunder... But that’s not what happens. Verse 4:

The word of the Lord came to him, “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” ⁵ He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

⁶ Abram believed the Lord, and [God] credited it to him as righteousness.

How would God react? Well, this is God and this is his reaction. It isn’t one of anger and judgement, but patience and love. He takes the grumpy old man in his bitterness outside, puts his hand on his shoulder and says, “Look up at the stars and you *count them*, old son. When I promise, I mean it.”

He's patient...and loving...and kind; despite our impatience and mistrust.

I told you (at the start) that Abram's story is ours and I hope you can see that Abram's whole experience is the same as how we come to Jesus. When it comes to Abram and us, God's grace comes **first**. Remember that God started making promises to Abram back in Harran before *Abram* had done *anything*. His family weren't devout Jews, they were idolaters. ^{Jos. 24:2} Abram did nothing to earn it, but God showed him kindness, and promised a blessing. And God does the same for us in Christ.

See Christ died for us, though we had not been born nor lived a day. The promise of forgiveness was made before we even breathed. You see, God's grace is *first*.

And, like Abram, this life of Christian faith is not one of smooth sailing and manifest destiny. Because sure, sometimes we're faithful (like Abram at his best); other times we indulge ourselves in sin and unbelief because we feel like we've earned it; and what is God doing about all this, anyway? Will he keep his promises? It'll probably all go to Eliezer. I'll probably just end up worm food. And yet even *through* all of our wrestling and doubts, God *is* faithful. He's patient and faithful and kind. And so often he takes us by the shoulder, to lead us out into the cool night air and says, "Look up at the stars, old son." Or in our case, look up at the cross - the symbol of God's promise to us.

He is faithful and kind, even when we are faltering and grumpy. His grace came first and it'll keep us to the last.

Of course, that's not to say that there's any levity in God's promises. Because the next part of God's promise to Abram proves that God is anything but lightweight; he is awesome and dreadfully serious in his commitment to his promises.

Verse 7: God also said to Abram, "I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." ⁸ But Abram said, "Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I shall gain possession of it?"

Again, like...is that a serious question? I mean, surely the answer is, "Because I'm God, and when I make a promise I mean it, **Abram!**" But God doesn't do that; though he does answer with an intensity.

Verse 9: 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."

It's about to go down. These are sacrificial animals. They are 'clean' animals, no predators in the mix. And they are valuable animals. A heifer, about ready to start calving. A goat giving milk, baby goats, and a ram right at the age where he's ready to help make lots of new sheep. For a herdsman, these are valuable animals. But they have a bigger job to do...and that job is to drive home a message.

Verse 10: they are cut in half and arranged opposite one another, probably along a path.

What's going on? Well this is the setup for a ceremony; it's usually imposed upon you when you're defeated by a

superior army. What happens is that a king makes another king walk between animals which have been gutted and halved; the king who walks between the animals has to promise his loyalty. The penalty for breaking the promise is that you would be rent in two, just like those animals. We might say, “Cross my heart and hope to die.” This (original) version is a little more heavy metal.

And it gets heavier as the promise-making ceremony begins.

It's dusk now, late in the day and verse 12 says that ‘*As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.*’ The Hebrew here speaks of an intense dread, terror or horror, combined with a distressing kind of darkness. If you've ever had sleep paralysis or night terrors, it's like the worst version of that kind of...manifest dread. A felt-darkness so thick it's as though it's crushing you.

And in this great darkness, God speaks again. The Lord says to Abram that if you think it's hard to trust the promise, your descendants are going to have to trust even harder. For four hundred years they'll be slaves. But...they *will come back*. I will *not* break my promise, God assures Abram.

And then in the dark of the night, the ceremony takes place.

Verse 17, When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the Lord made

a covenant with Abram and said, 'To your descendants I give this land...'

A king is passing between the animals, which have been rent in two. But the king is not a defeated one. He is the great one; the Lord. Under no compulsion, God swears an oath to Abram that he will maintain his promises; cross his heart and...well...

He's not kidding around. In the heavy darkness, God demonstrates the gravity of his promise.

And again, that's our story, isn't it?

(Mar. 15:25) It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. (15:33) At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. When he cried out in a loud voice...

In the heavy darkness, God demonstrates the gravity of his promise.

So what does it all mean for us?

Well it means that these stories don't just speak to us of a dreadful dark night 3,500 years ago. They speak to us today...in June, 2021. And they speak to us tomorrow and every day after. They tell us who God is to Abram and who he is to us. He is the God who is faithful to his promise. He's the God who patiently comforts us when we doubt. *Look up at the stars, you silly old feller.* And he is the God who, in the heavy darkness, demonstrates the gravity of his promise.

And what's amazing is that in his commitment to the promise, *he* was rent in two...not for his breaking of an oath, but for ours...for all of the oaths that we break and the lies that we tell...all the harm that we cause and the good that we don't do...for our cowardice, malice and envy...for our hate and our lust and our sin...Christ died for sin...not for his, but for ours. And he calls us to follow in the hope of life that goes beyond the heavy darkness.

So if you're here and you don't follow Jesus, know that he promises forgiveness and love, and friendship with God; and that that promise is deadly serious... *Cross my heart, and hope to...well...*

And if you're here and you *are* Christian...be reassured. This *isn't* a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps passage; Abram's story preaches **grace** to us. It is our story, and his God is our God. God is patient with him and with us in our doubts and our foibles and struggles. God doesn't make Abram walk through the rent halves; **God** walks through. And when **we** failed in the covenant of faith, and grace, before that even, **Christ** walked that darkest path for us.

God is committed to his promises—even to the point of death.

So may we trust in his good promises.