

He Cannot Tell a Lie

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 February 2023

Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 0 0] I cannot tell a lie. I cannot tell a lie. Perhaps, you know, those words have gone down in history as the words of the young George Washington. The story goes, as a young man, he accidentally cut his father's favorite cherry tree in the garden, and his father confronted him. And George Washington said, I cannot tell a lie, came clean. So the story goes, except that George Washington probably never said those words. Those words were only recorded about seven years after he died, and people think that his biographer, he happened to be a minister, wrote that because he wanted to show Washington as someone to look up to. And so, ironically, it's thought that this minister invented that story, put those words in George Washington's mouth to show that honesty is the best policy. And so the question is, can we believe George Washington, can we believe his biographer when they say, I cannot tell a lie? Could he not? It seems he could. Once we know the backstory, it kind of undermines the whole point of the story, doesn't it? And we've come to a passage of Genesis this morning where we find Abram asking that question not of a long-dead historical figure, but of God himself. God has made Abram a promise. God has called Abram to trust his promise. But when he comes down to it, is God going to keep his promise? Don't take my word for it. Just look, see that for yourself. God speaks in verse one. See, do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward. And then Abram asks two questions. You see that? Two questions. They both begin, but Abram said. See, the very next words out of his mouth. But Abram said, sovereign Lord, what can you give me? And then further down, verse eight, but Abram said, sovereign Lord, how can I know that God has promised his blessing? Life in a right relationship with him, life as he created it to be. He's promised to give that blessing to the world through Abram and his family.

But God, what can you give us? What can you do for us? It seems an impossible promise to keep. Is God powerful enough? Is he willing enough to give what he said he will give? Now, those are big questions. Is God able? Is he willing to keep his word? And our lives now and forever depend on that answer. The life-changing questions. And I imagine if you've grappled seriously with the claims of Christianity for more than five minutes, they're questions that you've asked in some form. Well, Abram is going to show us that unlike us, God cannot tell a lie. He cannot tell a lie. And God proves that to Abram, to us in two incredible ways here. So, two questions asked, two points. Firstly, can God keep his word?

Can he keep his promise? His word is right at the heart of this, isn't it? After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram. And when a chapter begins after this, what does that tell us? That what's happened before this is pretty important, understanding this. Last time, remember, Abram was in a world of war and kings and kingdoms. And what did he do? He chose to put his trust in God and give his allegiance to God's king. That was Melchizedek, king of Salem, who we saw was really standing in for Jesus Christ, our king of shalom, our king of peace. And to choose God, he had to turn down, remember, a counteroffer from the king of Sodom. This king could have made Abram a very wealthy man, but Abram did not want to get rich at the hands of this kingdom of the world as he had in the past.

This time, he chose not to put his hope in the world, but to put his hope in the possessor of heaven and earth. He trusted in God's promise. And what God says here is clearly in response to Abram's choice. Do not be afraid. Afraid of what? Well, clearly, the fallout from that choice, right? He has chosen to trust the invisible God over visible human powers. He's forgotten human protection, human reward. So what great words, verse one, do not be afraid, says God.

I am your shield. I am your very great reward. God is promising provision for Abram, complete provision, isn't he, when he is most vulnerable, when he is less well off than he could have been.

[5 : 40] But there's a burning question. It's actually run from chapter 11 onwards for Abram. If you just see it, verse two, what's the question? Abram said, Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless?

I have a friend who sometimes says, he wonders as he reads his Bible, sometimes whether it's him reading his Bible or his Bible reading him. Often when we open up the Bible, the Bible is opening up us at the same time. This is what we're like, isn't it? We can trust God in very visible, very public ways.

We can come together like this with a smile on a Sunday and worship him. We can talk about him to others who don't know him. And yet in the quiet of our hearts, when it's us and God and no one else, when we're praying at home, when we're thinking about our lives, sometimes we're less sure. Sometimes we have questions for God that we can't answer. Sometimes questions that we think, if anyone else knew what I had told God, they would never see me in the same way.

But those secret questions of the heart, they shouldn't shock us. If in reality, if we all in this room, if I said, right, share with the person next to you something that you have told God and no one else, we would be scared, but we would all have something to share.

[7 : 22] That's how it is with the father of the faithful. He's just made a very public display of his faith on the world stage, his faith in God and his king. But in private, he has questions for God that he doesn't know how to answer. Circles that he cannot square. And his first one is, can ye do what you've promised to do, God? Because what God has promised and the reality on the ground, look a million miles apart. Everything that God has promised Abram, a nation, a land, a family, blessing, it all hinges on the thing that Abram doesn't have, children. Of course, that would have been a personal grief and a sadness to Abram and Sarai throughout their lives, as it can be today for people who, for different reasons, don't have children of their own. But there's another dimension of confusion in Abram's heart, because unlike us, God had promised him a family and children.

Remember, God's promised to multiply him in chapter 12, I will make you into a great nation. Or chapter 13, I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. And so, for Abram, the burning question in his heart is less to do with why God hadn't given him children, as it is often for us. It's actually much deeper, it goes to the heart of who God is, because God promised. He promised, and the whole promise rests on this, but it isn't here yet. So, God, given that I remain childless, he says, what is it exactly you can give me? The suggestion is, if God can't give him children, then perhaps God can't give him anything that he has promised him. And so, God perhaps can't carry out his plan, his purpose for the world. God perhaps can't give the world his blessing. And so, is it, God, that you actually cannot redeem humanity and save the world? You do see that the crisis of faith for Abram, Abram's wondering, is God not powerful enough to bless the world as he has promised to do? It's so troubling to Abram, verse 3 is actually more like an accusation.

You have given me no children. You've done this, so a servant in my household will be my heir. My friends, where might we today? What might unsettle us in that way? What might raise questions for us about the power of God to keep his word? What might make us ask, is God not able?

Perhaps when we've shared the gospel and we've prayed for somebody that we love for years and years and years and seen no change?

[10 : 45] When we trust that Christ doesn't lose even one of his own, but seemingly outwardly faithful Christians fall away. When we get sick and die and God's promise of a new creation just seems too far off.

In those times, we might wonder, Lord, where is the promise of your coming? Are you not able to do what you have said you will do? And if you have not done this, then what can you do? What can you give?

Well, how does God answer that crisis of faith? Two things. He insists on his promise, verse 4, and he proves his power, verse 5. Just have a look.

In the face of Abraham's doubts, God reconfirms for him his word. That's so important for us, isn't it?

We sometimes come to the Bible a bit like a textbook of facts. And once we have learned all the facts, then we're sorted for life. But no, the Bible is the living word of the living God. And we need to hear him say the same things to us again and again and again and again at different times and different seasons of life. Not because we don't know that, because we don't know his word or we've forgotten what he's said. But because we need to see that over time, though our circumstances

change, his promises do not change. And though our faith shrinks back, God never holds back from his words.

[12 : 51] And so he gives us his word over and over to convince us of his faithfulness and truthfulness. And he backs up that promise here with a display of his power. He says, here's an exercise, Abram.

Get up, go outside and look up. Right, count the stars that you see. This was not the night sky from Aberdeen. This was before light pollution. What would Abram have seen as he looked up once or twice?

As I've been on holiday in the wilds, I've looked up at the sky. Maybe some of you have seen this kind of thing. And the sky is just littered with stars. And there is almost no dark patch of sky because the stars fill it up. That is what Abram would have seen as he looked up. Count the stars? That's impossible.

Impossible. Impossible to count the stars. Okay, Abram, now remember who it is you're speaking to. Not only the God who knows the number of the stars, but the God who spoke and brought the stars into being. He spoke and galaxies burst across the universe. So when this God says to Abram, this is what your family will be like. Who then can doubt his power to do it? We have his unchanging word.

So where do we look then to see God's power to do what he has said he will do? Of course, we can still look at the glory of creation, can't we? But the Bible actually points us today to one great act.

[14 : 31] It's a great act of new creation. It's Jesus' resurrection. The resurrection of Christ. This is the foundation, friends, that our whole faith is built on. The resurrection of Christ is the proof of his promise to save us now. Paul says, Ephesians 1, he wants us to know his incomparably great power for us who believe. The same power that he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead. The same power.

Paul says, see his life from the death power. Look at what he did for Christ, raising him to life. That is what he is doing for you. Amazing. He did it first in Christ. So he must be doing it for those who are in Christ. And the resurrection of Christ proves, of course, his power to save us forever.

This actually hit home for me in the most improbable of places, a funeral. Standing at the graveside by an open grave. Some of you have been to a funeral this past week.

It's a terrible place to stand. The final, the sense of a finality of death. What answer can you give to the last enemy? And it's hard to describe the sense of grief and hope together of staring death in the face at the grave. And reading these words from 1 Thessalonians. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again. And so we believe that God will raise with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

Hear God's answer. Hear God's answer.

[16 : 59] God tells us he is able to make the dead alive. You first in our hearts, then in our bodies. How can we question his power to do it when we see what he has done for Christ?

The God who created the stars gives life to the dead and he has promised to save and to redeem us and others through the resurrection of Christ. So friends, he is able.

He is able. He is able. And Abram believed his word. We'll come back to that later. But since he is able and he has not yet done it, what's the next question?

Is he not willing? He is able, but will he keep his promise? This is our second point, our second question. God also said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out of Arab the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.

But Abram said, Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it? Again, God promises, and Abram isn't sure. Well, how can I know for sure that you will do this?

[18 : 07] And this time God's answer is very different, isn't it? Because now he's not showing Abram his power to do what he said. He's proving his willingness to do it. And he does it in a really dramatic way.

And to us it just sounds quite weird, doesn't it? God says get animals. And they're chopped in half and put two across from each other like a walkway or a runway.

But in the context of this time, this book, that would have been quite familiar. Because in the ancient world, this is literally how you cut a covenant. A covenant, remember that's a relationship that God begins with humanity by making a promise.

But there were other kinds of covenants, normally between a greater king and a lesser king. The greater king or the overlord would give the lesser king's protection.

In exchange for a promise of their loyalty. So we saw an example of a covenant being broken last time, didn't we? The overlord, Kedalama.

[19 : 12] Remember that the five kings, the five cities said, no more of that, thanks. They threw off his rule. And the covenant was broken. And so this is a world of broken promises and broken covenants.

And it is into this world that God comes to make his covenant. And the point of this ceremony is to show that God will never, ever break his covenant.

He will never fail to keep his promises as we fail to keep our promises. So Abram cuts the animals. He makes the walkway. And then he waits.

He falls into a deep sleep. And God comes to him. Comes with a promise. Again, verse 13. The Lord said to him, no for certain.

And then he just tells the story of the next 400 years in great detail. This takes us right up to the beginning of the book of Joshua. That's how certain God's word is.

[20 : 17] That we can read it unfolding in the pages of history. But what about the animals? Well, when kings made covenants, after they had made their promises to each other, they would walk together down the walkway between the cut up animals.

And they did that to say this. If I break my promise, let me become like these animals. Today, people might casually say things like, I swear on my life.

Well, back then, they really were swearing on their own lives to keep their promises on the threat of being cut up like these animals were cut up. So what does God do?

Look at verse 17. When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. Something that looks like cloud and fire.

The pillar of cloud, the pillar of fire. That cloud, that fire. They passed down the walkway of butchered animals. This is God.

[21 : 29] God walking between the carcasses. This is God swearing on his own life to do what he said he'll do. It's God saying, if I fail to keep my promise, let me become like these slaughtered animals.

But where is Abram? What's he doing? What if he fails to keep his covenant with God? Well, he's not walking, is he, between the animals? What's he doing? He's sleeping.

Only God commits himself like this to his word. This is what Hebrews 6 is talking about that we read earlier when it says, when God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.

That's how committed God is to his word. It goes on, because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath.

God did this so that by two unchangeable things in which, listen, it is impossible for God to lie. Impossible for God to lie.

[22 : 45] We who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. How willing is God to keep his promise to us?

Or willing enough that he stakes his own life on it? Again, where do we look today, friends, to see God's unchanging commitment to bless us and save us?

When did God stake his life on our salvation? Well, surely we look back, don't we, and see when he came into this world in the person of his son.

When he took our humanity on himself to suffer, to be beaten, to be lashed, to be cursed, to be crucified, to die.

When the son of God became like those animals, when he took that curse and that punishment for breaking the covenant on himself, not symbolically or ceremonially, but in fact, not because he had broken the covenant, and not because he had failed to keep his promise, but because we had.

[23 : 57] We have rebelled against our God and King. We have said no more of your rule, your protection, your love, and even when he came to save us from our rebellion, we didn't believe him, but we crucified him.

So friends, it is us. It is us who deserve the fate of those animals. Our unfaithfulness to God. But it was God who walked that path, and not Abraham.

It was God taking the curse on himself so that we would not have to suffer it. So Christ died on the cross to take our punishment for our rebellion, the sin, the unfaithfulness of those who trust in him. And he did that to fulfill his promise to save, to redeem lost and sinful and rebellious people from the curse of our sin. So that rather than curse us, God blesses us in Christ.

So that when we hear then God's promise to save, to redeem, we wonder, is God really willing to save me? Is he really willing to redeem me?

[25 : 10] We look back, don't we, to the cross. And there we see his love displayed. For while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Friends, that is what it means to say we have a covenant-keeping God. He has promised and committed himself wholly to saving sinners. And it's a staggering grace that God, who cannot lie, who cannot fail, that he would take responsibility for our failures and our broken promises so that he could save us and bless us.

So how do we respond? We've seen God is able to do what he said. We've seen he's willing to do what he said. Well, how do we respond? I said we come back to Abram's response in verse 6, that Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.

I hope we can see that Abram was right to put his trust in this God and his promise. Yes, he had searching questions. And perhaps you have come, you have questions.

Perhaps you were not sure this morning. But by two things in which God cannot lie, he proved to Abram just how trustworthy he was. What a firm foundation for his faith.

[26 : 36] And by two unchangeable things, the cross and the empty tomb, God has proved to us just how trustworthy he still is.

How great is his love? How strong is his power to save us? And so surely the right response for us is to believe God, to take him at his word, to rest our faith in his promise.

Perhaps you have done that. But our faith always needs refreshing, doesn't it? Always needs renewing. Our questions, our doubts, they need answering more than once, don't they?

Different seasons, different struggles, different challenges. Let me invite you this morning then, if that is you, to look again at the cross and to look again at the empty tomb of Jesus and rest your faith all the more firmly on God and on his word.

And perhaps you've never done that. Perhaps you've heard that invitation many times and you have never really considered the cross, the tomb, what God says.

[27 : 53] Well, here's the special thing for all of us, that whoever we are, whoever we are, the very first time we look at the cross, the tomb, and rest our faith on this God and on his promise to save, then we are as saved as we will ever be.

Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness. None of us are righteous in our own right, none of us good enough to come to God in and of ourselves.

As I say, we deserve to be treated like those animals for our sin, but when we put our trust in Christ, as we are today, even with the tiniest shoot, the weakest flicker of faith, then God credits to us the perfect life and the perfect rightness of his son, Jesus Christ.

It's as if we stood in incredible debt before God, an unpayable debt. Lots of people think that being saved is just about balancing the books. We cannot do it.

We cannot do it. So instead, God is so faithful that he takes our debt, he lays it on Jesus, so that he can take Jesus' infinite credit and give it to us.

[29 : 17] So that simply by putting our trust in him, we might stand before God and as God looks at us today, he sees not our sin, but the infinite credit of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So that it does not matter whether you have been a Christian for five minutes or for 50 years, you cannot be more right in God's eyes than you are the very moment that you put your trust in his son.

Because in his sight, you are as righteous as Jesus. And he gives us that gift, friends, that rescue from the debt of our sin, that credit of righteousness simply by taking God at his word.

simply by putting our trust in his promise of new life in him. So let me encourage you to do that this morning if you haven't done that as we pray.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you so much and we praise you as the God of steadfast love and faithfulness for us.

[30 : 35] Father, we thank you because we have failed to keep our vows to you. We have failed to give you what you are owed and yet you have given us what we do not deserve.

We thank you that your promise is sure and we pray, our Father, that you would help our unbelief.
Lord, help us to take a firm hold on the promise of your word, to cling to the cross.
Lord, that we would not take our eyes away from the empty tomb, the death, the resurrection of the
Lord Jesus. Lord, let them give us hope and confidence that you are able, that you are willing to
save.
Lord, save us, we pray, and help us, our Father, to live in this world holding out the hope of
salvation to others. for this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.