

To Generations Yet Unborn

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[0 : 00] big questions that's come out of our time in this part of the book of Genesis has been, do we trust God to keep his promises? God has committed himself to doing things for this family.

He's recommitted himself to doing those things when their faith has failed, and he's proved over and over that he always does what he promises to do. So, Genesis has left us asking so many times, hasn't it? When will this family learn that the God of these promises is completely, unfailingly, infinitely trustworthy? Well, it's taken several decades, but at last we see today Abraham, again, the father of the faithful, learning that lesson. And seeing this helps us to reflect today on whether and how far we ourselves trust God to keep his precious and very great promises to us, his family today. Does he have our settled and undivided trust? Genesis, I think, in lots of ways was written to help us to learn from our past what we struggle to learn from our experience.

You've probably heard the saying, those who don't learn the lessons of history are destined to repeat them. And for us, if our trust is in Christ today, this book, the Old Testament, it is our family history.

So, as we read this history, have we learned the lesson? Our God is faithful. As with the last chapter, chapter 24 isn't the most obvious thing to include in a book like this. It's a brilliant story, isn't it? But the sweeping romance of it might disguise the overall point, which is not Isaac and Rebecca falling madly in love and getting married. I think that does happen, both those things, but it's only the last three verses out of 67. Instead, I think what we see here is a story about Abraham's mission to find for Isaac, his son, a marriage that will secure the future of God's promises for the next generation, a generation as yet unborn, his grandchildren. And bigger still, it's a story about God's own unfailing love and faithfulness to this family. We see him guiding even the very smallest details of their lives down to the very second in order to keep his promise to bless them and through them to bless the world. So, let us learn again to trust him as we follow the father of our faith. Our points this morning are all about trust. Firstly, then, trust God's promise. That's what Genesis urges us to do, even from verse 1. Look, Abraham was now very old, and the Lord had blessed him in every way.

At the start of our series in chapter 12, we saw a promise of blessing, and now at the end of Abraham's very long life, we're told, true to his word, God had blessed him in every way. This God is faithful.

[3 : 30] But now we and he turn to the future. What's going to happen when this man that God has chosen and called and promised to dies? What next? We know he has a promised son, Isaac, but what about after him?

If Isaac doesn't have a wife and children, then how will Abraham ever have descendants that number more than the stars in the sky? So, he gets his senior servant. We could think of him as his chancellor, I guess, the servant in charge of all that he had, because he wants this guy, verse 3, to swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I'm living, but will go to my country and my relatives and get a wife for my son, Isaac. So, he makes the servant promise, doesn't he, not to do something and to do something. The first thing he wants him to promise is not to match Isaac with the girl next door, the daughters of the Canaanites. I'm sure they were nice girls who Isaac noticed. We saw last week, their dads were decent blokes, but Abraham insists his son's wife isn't to be from the land, but instead from his own family. Why is that? Well, God has made him the father of a new family, a family God would bless and through them bless every family of the world. And so, this family has a special identity from God they have to keep, special calling from God that they have to follow. And so, they cannot get tangled up with the other so-called gods, or the idols, the false gods that the people of the land worship. That's the warning throughout the Old Testament, that flirting, dating,

marriage, sex with partners outside of God's family, will introduce idols into our lives that draw us away from the living God. And brothers and sisters, this is a side note, but nothing has changed for us as New

Testament believers. God's word is the same because our hearts are the same. If the most important person in our lives, humanly speaking, doesn't love the Lord, then our hearts will be torn in two competing directions. And now, sometimes that does happen when in a marriage, one person, the husband or wife, becomes a Christian. But that is something different. Paul says in 1 Corinthians, really clearly, stick with them. He'll love your husband, love your wife, as long as they stick with you. God has brought you together. You don't know what he will do through your relationship. But it's also really clear that we're not to choose relationships like that. Or marry people we know are not Christians. 1 Corinthians 4, 9, men, don't we have the right to take a believing wife with us? Or 1 Corinthians 7, 39, ladies, if a woman's husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. And at that level, Abraham's desire should be our desire for ourselves and our children, that our husbands and wives should not come from the world, but from within God's family. Not as a weird rule, but as an expression of our trust in God's promise that through Christ, he is blessing his family. And in Christ, he is holding out grace to all the families of the world. And so just like Father Abraham, we don't want to introduce relationships into our lives that would distract us and our families and the world from Christ.

That servant feels perhaps as we do. That's a big ask. What if there isn't a girl, he says. Should I take Isaac with me? No, says Abraham. Make sure you don't take my son back there. Now, this is a bit different for us. We can go and find a husband, a wife, but Isaac has to stay where he is. And why is that? Because, says Abraham, verse 7, the Lord, the God of heaven, who brought me out of my father's household and my native land, who spoke to me and promised me on earth, saying, to your offspring I will give this land. That's his reasoning. God promised that 50 years ago. But again, here's a concrete expression, a decision, where he's putting his trust in God's promise that Isaac is not to set up his family outside of the promised land. And so Abraham's trust in God's promise has a strange outworking. Isaac has to have a wife from his family back home, but Isaac can't go himself to find her. And that's a huge thing to ask. Abraham knows that. There's even a get-out clause. If the woman is unwilling to come back with you, you will be released from this oath of mine. He doesn't even know if it's possible, but he trusts that it will be. Here's the rest of verse 7. [8 : 58] The Lord, the God of heaven, who brought me out of my father's household and my native land, he will send his angel before you so that you can get a wife for my son from there.

See, all his hope for his family and God's promise and for the world is resting on the God of heaven to be faithful to his promises. Humanly speaking, the chances are impossibly slim. But in view of God's promises, there is no chance, there is no probability, there is only a certainty that God will do what is needed to keep his covenant promises forever.

Friends, this same God of heaven and earth has promised that through the life, death, and resurrection of his son Jesus, forgiveness of sins and eternal life is held out freely to every family of the world.

God of heaven and earth is held out freely to the world. And I think that through the world is God of heaven and earth, the Lord has promised that through faith in him and his finished work, I am saved. That's the promise. If that's not you today, you wouldn't say that. It can be.

Whoever you are, wherever you are from, being right with God is simply a question of putting your trust in his son and what he's done to rescue us. But does that trust then show in the big decisions that we have to make? Who we choose to go out with or marry? Where we choose to live or work? [10 : 47] If we trust in God's promise that his grace and his blessing comes to every family of the world through Jesus, it has to change our answers to those questions, doesn't it? As it did for God's family in the beginning. Trusting God's promise turns our lives upside down. But if God keeps his promises, why wouldn't we trust him with all of our lives in every department for him to be faithful?

Trusting God's promise. That brings us to our second point, trust in God's providence. Now, what is providence? It's one of those words Christians use, isn't it? Providence is a word for the way God works out his promises in our lives and in history. Here's a definition of providence from a summary of our faith, a shorter catechism. God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful, preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions. It's the way he governs all his creatures and all his actions. And that's what we see, isn't it, in the rest of the story, that God doesn't make promises that he doesn't see through in real concrete ways in our lives and in history.

Rather, he does govern all his creatures and all their actions so that his promises are worked out in time and space. So, how do we trust that God is doing that in our lives?

Working out his promises. Well, the servant shows us how. Okay, he goes on a journey. He takes his ten camels loaded with the best gifts. He travels down to the town of Nahor to find Isaac, a wife. Just to illustrate what's happening here, it would be a bit like living your whole life in John O'Groats and then one day walking on foot down to Land's End to visit family that you've not had contact with for 50 years to ask for someone's niece to marry your friend's son, something like that.

Okay, now, cultural differences notwithstanding, what is happening here is not much less weird than that. But somehow, after days of traveling, he pitches up with all of his stuff in exactly the right place, in exactly the right time, near the well outside the town, towards evening, the time the women go out to draw water.

[13:26] So, there's our first clue that God is in control of the story. And the servant trusts that, too, because, verse 12, then he prayed. Friends, we trust in God's providence.

He's working out his promises in our day-to-day lives when we pray for him to be at work and we pray that we would recognize what he's doing.

He prayed, Lord, God of my master Abraham, make me successful today and show kindness to my master Abraham. See, I'm standing beside this spring and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water.

May it be that when I say to a young woman, please let down your jar that I may have a drink, and she says, drink and I'll water your camels too, let her be the one you've chosen for your servant Isaac.

By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master. Now, we need to be careful not to put God to the test. When we demand signs from God, normally it's because we are trying to take control of the story.

[14:31] God does not have to give us signs for him to be at work in our lives as he's promised to be. But the point more broadly here is that when we pray to God about the smallest details of our lives, we are recognizing our dependence on his providence, and we are tuning in to his providence too.

The servant does not sit by the well, does he, and get out his phone and start scrolling. He sits by the well and he prays that God would please, please be at work to deliver on his promise, and please let him see how he is at work, that he might recognize it.

He prays to see God's providence at work. I wonder, brothers and sisters, do we expect to see God working out his promises in our day-to-day lives?

Or are his promises kind of up there somewhere, kind of disconnected from our experiences and relationships and interactions?

How often do we start a day when we go to meet someone or as we're beginning our work and pray, Lord, please work out your promise today to draw me and others to Christ, and please let me see how you're doing that so that I can be part of it.

[15:56] Prayer is how we depend on him to work and we tune into his work in our own and others' lives. God is at work in the very smallest details, brothers and sisters.

So pray for that, and you'll be surprised at what you see when you begin to pray to see God's work. And when we see his work, we praise him.

Verse 15 is wonderful, isn't it? Before he had finished praying, Rebecca came out with her jar on her shoulder. Brilliant.

God is showing he had it all sorted out even before the servant thought to ask. And so the servant tests Rebecca out. He asks her for a drink and he holds his breath.

Will she ask, will she offer water to his camels as he has prayed that she would? And she does. I'll water your camels too.

[16:54] And as she runs about getting water for the camels, without saying a word, the man watched her closely to learn whether or not the Lord had made his journey successful. If you ever had a moment like that, where you're just standing open-mouthed and watching God's work unfold before your eyes.

Just stand back and watch and be amazed at what I'm doing, says God. Once the servant's sure, he asks about her family, gives her the ring, and she goes to tell the family.

And what next, we want to know, don't we? What's next? But we pause. We're dying to hear the next bit, but then the man bowed down and worshipped God, saying, praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master.

He bowed down and worshipped God. We trust God's providence, brothers and sisters, when we praise him for what he's done and what he's doing. Again, how often do we pause in the cause of a day, a week, a year even, and just take stock of what God has done in us and through us, in our church family, and give him praise and thanks and worship?

The words the servant uses are words we have even more right to praise God for. His hesed, his kindness, and his emet, his faithfulness. It's the two Hebrew words that we should all know.

[18 : 31] Kindness and faithfulness. His hesed, God's unfailing, steadfast covenant love. And his emet, his truthfulness, trustworthiness or faithfulness.

Both those words are at the heart of God's character and his relationship with us. John probably has those words in view when he writes in chapter one of his gospel, the law came through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Grace and truth. Love and faithfulness. We praise God because we know in Christ he does not forget to shower these things on us in Jesus.

I have a friend who, when he was in a really hard place, made a habit at the end of each day of writing down just one or two things that he was thankful to God for that day.

And it might have been a struggle. I'm sure it would be a struggle for some of us some days to do that. But just think over the course of a month or a year or two or three, what a record you would have of God's love and faithfulness to you every single day that you had lived.

[19 : 48] We praise him for his good providence in our lives. And finally, the servant presents the story of God's providence. There's a big, huge chunk of this chapter we didn't read earlier, from verse 34 to 48, because the servant is simply retelling the story to Rebecca's family.

I guess at the time partly to convince them that God really was at work in a special way. But as far as Genesis goes, Moses could just have written, couldn't he?

And he told them everything that had happened. We would get the gist, wouldn't we? But he's written it all out longhand. Why? Well, partly to convince us of God's work, even in the smallest things as he works out his promises.

But partly, surely, because God's people then and now are to tell out the wonders of his love. The servant presents the story of the love and faithfulness of God to this family.

And that is another way that we trust his providence. We don't only privately pray and praise him, but we share it publicly with our brothers and sisters in Christ and with those on the outside.

[21 : 08] It's so encouraging, isn't it, to hear how God is at work in someone's life. We might be a bit reticent to do that. We don't like talking about ourselves or sharing details of our lives, do we?

We're very private people. But when the story is about what God is doing in our lives, then it's not really about us, is it? It's about him. Trusting God's providence means trusting he's done what he's done, not only for our personal good, but for his glory.

And that is what comes through in the servant's retelling of this story, the faithfulness and the love and the power of God to do what he's promised to do. That's what should come through in our stories and our personal testimonies, to share with one another what God is doing in our lives.

You know, I hope that helps us. It helped me in the week to think about that. I hope it helps us together to kind of bring God's promises from way up there, where I suspect they often are, right down into the fabric of our day-to-day.

Pray, praise, present. I think they do come in that order. We're not going to present God's goodness to others if we're not praising him for ourselves.

[22 : 26] We won't know what to praise him for if we're not praying to him about his work in our lives. So start with prayer, brothers and sisters. Seek out what God is doing in your day-to-day.

Pray for him to show you. Pray for him to be faithful, as he surely will, to what he's promised, because he rules over every second, every particle and detail of our lives to carry out his good promises for us and his world.

Praise him when you see it. Share it when you can. Which brings us on to our final point this morning. What is God doing for us and our world?

Lastly, trusting God's purpose. Rebecca's family hear what's happened, and they say, this is from the Lord. We can say nothing to you one way or the other.

They agree for Rebecca to marry Isaac. Later, Rebecca agrees herself to go. She's clearly very excited. When she sees Isaac in his field, she hops off a camel.

[23 : 34] Well, who's that, she says. And she puts her veil on, and they go together, and Isaac loves her, and they get married and live happily ever after. But two things tell us that's not where the story ends.

Firstly, remember, even though at face value, this is about Isaac's marriage, this chapter is still in the section of Genesis that is about the family history of Abraham.

We don't get to the bit titled The Family History of Isaac for another whole chapter. You can see that in chapter 25. So we know the point isn't really to do with Isaac. In fact, he's hardly in it, is he?

He's at home. The point is God being faithful to Abraham by matching his son with the right wife.

Why is that the point? Well, the second clue is that the wedding isn't the end of the story.

We see that in verse 60. Her family blessed Rebecca with words not to do with her or her new husband, but to do with her children.

[24 : 42] They blessed Rebecca and said to her, Our sister, may you increase to thousands upon thousands. May your offspring possess the cities of their enemies. May God multiply ye, they say.

Thousands upon thousands, their hearts are set on the day when they'll see the victory of her offspring. Does that remind us of anything in the book of Genesis?

Surely God's promise to Abraham to multiply him, not one or two times, but many, many thousands, a countless number of descendants.

And God's promise to the serpent that the offspring of the woman would come to crush his head and destroy sin and evil forever.

We know from Genesis that is neither of Rebecca's sons. She only has two for a start, and Jacob and Esau are hardly serpent-crushing material. But the promise and the blessing look forward.

[25 : 41] Over a thousand years in the life of this family, to the birth of a child who would come to crush sin and evil forever. Who would grow God's family by a thousand, a million, a billion times over.

Who would bring God's blessing and grace to a world under the curse through his life, death, and resurrection. In Genesis, we are just seeing the first few bricks being laid on the foundation.

But we know that those bricks will one day form a palace for an everlasting king, and a temple for a great high priest, and the household of God that we today in Jesus are now part of.

Because these small bricks, Isaac and Rebecca, will one day lead to Jesus Christ. And through him, to us sitting here today, who have our trust in him.

So what is God's purpose? When we live by his promises and see his work in our lives, what do we know that God is doing behind the scenes?

[26 : 54] We know that God is blessing us, his people in Christ, working all things to the good of those who love him. And we know that he is holding out his blessing to every family of the earth, gathering men, women, and children of every tribe, language, people, and nation around the throne of his son, Jesus Christ.

That is where his covenant is going, isn't it? Brothers and sisters, we know that his blessing does not end with us here today. But it looks forward to generations as yet unborn, and it looks outwards to every family of the earth.

And we know that he is faithful to fulfill his promise, to bless, save, and redeem his family and the world.

So as we go into another week, let us trust his promise, trust his providence, trust his purpose that has been worked out through time, that is at work around the world, fulfilled in his promised son, the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Let's put our trust in him together now to pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Gracious Father, we praise you for your faithfulness.

[28 : 20] Lord, we thank you that we can stand on these promises of old made thousands of years ago to your family and know that we are safe with you and saved and redeemed through the finished work of your son, Jesus, because you are faithful to your word.

Father, we pray that you would help us to trust all the more firmly in your promise. Father, pray for those of us who today do not as yet have our trust in you.

And Lord, how we pray that you would reveal your trustworthiness. Lord, that you are worthy of all of our faith and of our devotion. And Father, for those of us who do trust you, Lord, we pray help our

unbelief.

Lord, we confess the failure of our faith so often, Lord, to rest on your promises. Lord, root us, we ask, in Jesus and ground us in him, we pray, for we ask in his name.

Amen.