

God's Faithfulness in our Falleness

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[0 : 00] When will God give up? Have you ever wondered, at what point will God lose patience and call it a day?

Not only with the world, but if we're Christians, with us, with the church. What would it take for God to walk out on his family?

We're coming to the end of a real biblical epic this morning. The story of Jacob, or as Genesis calls it, the family history of Isaac.

And if you've been with us through our series, I'm sure you have asked that question along the way. God has set apart this family as his own, but they have fought with him pretty much every step.

By the way, if you haven't been here, and this is maybe your first time with us, I'm so glad that you're here. And you've picked a great Sunday, because you're getting the point at the end, without having to wade through the muck and mire of the story.

[1 : 04] I hope after today that you'll want to go back and read more. But more than that, I hope, as we go from here today, that we will have an answer to that question.

When will God finally give up on his family? I'm sure as you think back personally over the years of your own life, even this year, possibly this week, that you'll understand why God would or should.

Or take a look at the church in our country, in Scotland, or south of the border, down in England. It's hard not to think, isn't it, that the wheels are really coming off.

Or we could name, couldn't we, church leaders who have given in themselves, fallen into disgrace. Another one recently in America, Steve Lawson. And surely we can't help but wonder, not whether, but when, God will give up on us.

But friends, God breathed out this chapter of his word in Genesis, so that we would know for sure that the answer is, never. Never.

[2 : 24] If our faith is resting in Christ, he wants us to know today that no one can snatch us out of his hand. Nothing can separate us from his love.

What he's begun, he will bring to completion. He will never leave us or forsake us. That's arguably what the whole book of Genesis has been about.

It's certainly what this section of Genesis is about. And what this final chapter in this section wants to leave us with today. God is unfailingly faithful to his unfaithful people in a fallen world.

And our two points this morning are really the two ways that God wants us to respond to that truth as we leave this part of Genesis. The two big applications, if you like. Firstly, then, he calls us to worship him for his faithfulness.

Look at verse 1 with me. God said to Jacob, arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled your brother Esau.

[3 : 33] Now, we sang something like this just a moment ago. I joyed when to the house of God, go up. You said to me, Bethel means house of God.

It's the place where God first met and spoke to Jacob. And that's what Jacob called it. And now 20 years have passed since then. But in that time, God has done just what he promised.

He has been faithful. And so now God is telling Jacob to go back there to worship him again. And Jacob gets that personally in his own words.

Verse 3, then let us arise and go up to Bethel so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.

If your best friend had a birthday party, someone who's really been there for you over the years, stuck with you even when you haven't been a very good friend, you wouldn't find excuses not to go, would you?

[4 : 42] You wouldn't make other plans. You would make sure that you were there to celebrate their life, to thank them, to mark your friendship in a special way.

Now, there are places I can think of, one place in particular, where I've gone to pray about things that have really weighed on my heart and things that God didn't have to do in the way that I wanted, but prayers that, as I look back, I can see over the years, God has answered in his own way, in his own time, in a way that's true to his own character and his promises so that I can stand here and say that God has never let me down.

And while, of course, I'm thankful to him and I thank him for that every day, there's still a part of me that wants to go back to that place and mark that and raise an altar in my heart to him and thank him and worship him for his faithfulness to me.

It's like that now for Jacob to the power of infinity. He trusted God for specific things that God had promised him at Bethel. He would grow his family and give him a home in Canaan.

He would be with him and bring him back, and God has kept his word. And so now God calls him back with his family to that special place to worship him for being their faithful covenant promise-keeping God.

[6 : 10] But we wonder, don't we, why is God inviting these people to his party at all? Right? Haven't they done enough? I mean, look what they have to do in verse 2 just to get ready to meet their faithful God.

Jacob said to his household and all who were with him, put away the foreign gods that are among you. So all through their relationship with the Lord, all through the years and the whole story that we've been in in Genesis, they were secretly texting other gods on the side, false gods.

And we're not talking just about imaginary friends, but these gods can be buried, right, hidden with their earrings, actual statues made of wood or stone. Why would a faithful God want an unfaithful family?

It's not as if he doesn't know about the idols, is it? Why would he still be speaking to these people, want them to come and worship him? And of course, this is after they cut him out completely in the last chapter.

Terrible things happened. And not once did they pray to him or ask him to show them the way forward. They are sinful, godless, idol worshippers.

[7 : 31] Not a happy, put-together, faithful family for a faithful covenant God. Yet, yet it is clear, isn't it, that God is sticking with this family.

He's still speaking to them. And not to give them both barrels, which is what they deserve, but to call them back to worship him and to live with him.

Go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to worship the God who has saved you and has been with you wherever you have gone. And friends, that is still God's call to us today.

Whoever you are, however much you have ignored God or pushed him away and lived without him, however many times you've turned to things of this world and asked them to give you what only he can give, he comes to us and speaks to us today, not to point the finger, but to call us back to himself, to worship him afresh, to live for him again.

Sometimes people say that he's a God of second chances. I don't think that does him justice at all, actually. He is a God who holds out his hands to us all day long.

[8 : 57] He is a God of unimaginable patience and inconceivable grace. With him, there are countless opportunities to turn back and put our hands in his hands and let him lead us as our God through life.

You know, a second chance makes it sound, doesn't it, like he lets us have another go at life, right? Maybe you'll do better this time. No. No, it's not a chance like that to do better.

When God speaks to us and calls us back to himself, it's to make a lasting change in us, to give us a new love for him, a trust in him, to want to worship him, a relationship, the forgiveness of all of our sins and a desire to live for him.

Some of you have the chance to do that for the first time today, to turn to him, to worship him, and to live with him as your God. I pray that you would.

Don't go from here without speaking to someone about that if you've got questions, if that's something that you want to do. But this isn't the first time for Jacob, and it won't be the first time for many of us here.

[10:14] We heard Bradley a moment ago promise to spend his life turning from sin and pursuing Christ's glory and honor. As Christians, we know, don't we, that's not something that we just do the one time, but it's a lifestyle that we enter into when we turn to Christ and put our trust in him.

Whether you've stood at the front of a church and you've publicly vowed that or not, that's the lifestyle that you signed up for when you turned to Christ and gave your life to him.

And so, brothers and sisters, to the degree that you need to do that, to return to him and put away false gods and abide in him and give him the thanks and praise that he deserves, God calls you to do that today and every day.

And that's just what this family do now. They bury their idols, they wash and change, they go up to God's house and worship and live with him. Notice on the way that now they've begun to give the Lord his proper place in their lives.

Well, the people in the land begin to appreciate his majesty and power. A terror from God fell on them so they didn't pursue and attack them. So, so different from last week, isn't it?

[11:36] When God's family doesn't hold God in awe and reverence, well, neither do the nations. When God's family learns to fear him rightly, well, the world learns to fear him rightly too.

They finally reach Bethel. Jacob worships God and as he does, he reflects on God's faithfulness to him. We get two kind of flashbacks here. One in verse seven. There he built an altar and called the place El Bethel because there God had revealed himself to him when he fled his brother.

So there's the first time God met him and made promises to him. Find that back in chapter 28. And then in verse nine and 10, it's clearly talking about something that happened in the past, right?

On Jacob's way back from Laban's house in Paddan Aram, it's the time God came down and met with Jacob and he wrestled with him. Remember that? In the night. And he gave him a new name, a new identity.

Read about that in chapter 32. So it's a little bit like at the end of an epic adventure movie, maybe a kind of, I don't know, Avengers movie, something like that. The director might bring back a bit of a soundtrack from the beginning or maybe replay scenes from earlier in the movie just to begin to tie all the threads together, to round it all off.

[13:04] So now Jacob is looking back on those two great scenes of his life when God promised and proved that he was with him. And so he worships God for them because he has been faithful.

But now God speaks to him again, verse 11, and God said to him, and these words are super important for us to see. Just look with me at verse 11 where God says, God said to him, I am God Almighty, be fruitful and multiply.

A nation, an accompany of nations shall come from you. Kings shall come from your own body. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you and I will give the land to your offspring after you.

So God's not only recapping scenes from his life but promises that is made to him, to his family, to Abraham, then to Isaac, and then to his son Jacob.

Children, fame, land, blessing, the same promises that we've seen before in Genesis. But like whiskey, they only get better with age.

[14:13] And so it's a bit like God is giving Jacob a little taste out of the barrel just to confirm to him that these promises really do belong to him and to his family and that they will be poured out fully when they reach full maturity.

And that's a wonderful reminder for us, friends, that God's faithfulness doesn't only stretch the length of one lifetime. God's faithfulness stretches back before Jacob or even his dad Isaac had ever been born and it stretches further forward even than he can see to the day when kings and nations will come from his children's children.

God measures his faithfulness not in weeks or months or years or even lifetimes but in generations. Generations. There's even a part there that goes all the way back to the beginning, isn't there? Did you see that? Be fruitful and multiply. Even that blessing God gave on page one of the Bible he gives to this family.

God remembers his promises for that long. And so, friends, if we're in Christ today we certainly each have much to thank God for.

[15:34] His faithfulness to us, how he has been good to us in more ways than we can possibly count even today let alone in our lives. But God measures his faithfulness in generations which means that if you've come here today and you're struggling to see how God's promises are cashing

out in your life now, right, you're struggling to see how God is at work in your family or your health or your work or just your general life circumstances, you can still come up to God's house and worship him because his love endures forever and his faithfulness to all generations.

We worship him above all, don't we, not for the record that we have kept of his goodness through our own life but we worship him above all for faithfully coming to us in the person of his son Jesus Christ.

We worship him because he is the yes and amen to all of God's promises. He is where heaven meets earth. He is God with us in him. The fullness of God was pleased to dwell and Christian friends, we dwell in him.

Come to God's house and dwell there he says. Friends, for us today that's not a place that we go, it's a person that we know. Jesus is the house of God and he calls us to abide in him, to live in him, dwell in him, rest in him and there to worship God because he is our promise making, promise keeping, ever faithful God.

Brothers and sisters, will ye praise him today for meeting with us and sticking with us in Jesus? Are you worshipping him today for all his faithfulness to you and to us as his family?

[17:40] That's the first response that our passage calls for to worship God for his faithfulness.

The second is that we walk with God through our fallenness.

Just have a glance down at verse 16. I wonder if you picked this up in the reading. The first half of the chapter they're on their way to Bethel. The second half they're journeying from Bethel, right? So 1 to 15 they're going to the house of God. 16 to the end they're on their way back into the world. Now it's not an exact parallel but I guess it's a bit like we've come here to meet with God in our service and later we'll go back out through those doors back out into the world and into our week and God goes with us but that's not the same as spending this special time here that this isn't where we stay in this kind of meeting with him is it?

And in some traditions churches are places of refuge or sanctuary places people flee to escape capture but we can't stay here as an escape from the world right?

Like a bunker that we can hide in we have to go back out into the world and as we do we find like God's family back then that life with a faithful God is still hard because we are fallen and our world is fallen.

[19:09] before they even reach the next town they've come from the house of God and they're on their way and before they even get to the next place Rachel dies in childbirth.

This is Rachel who first caught Jacob's eye on his run away from Esau at the well he'd served 14 years just to marry and who were told those years felt like but a few days because he loved her to spend that time with her that Rachel is suddenly in labor and has hard labor and with her dying breath names her son.

It's a harsh reminder of the fallenness of our world isn't it? When Leah was having children and Rachel wasn't she cried to her husband words that are chilling to remember give me children or I will die.

It's a horrible twist isn't it that in the end it's having children that takes her life. Something that she thought would make her whole has broken her.

Something that she thought would bring her fullness has brought her sorrow. That's what she calls her son son of my sorrow. And what do you say to that?

[20:37] What is there to say? Life is full of sickening tragedy like that and we don't have easy answers but we know that it's not meant to be like this.

Near the beginning of Genesis when our first parents sinned God cursed them and the world and part of his curse was that giving birth would be painful.

God had said to be fruitful and multiply but now they'd turned away from God well that task would come with a cost, pain, difficulty, sometimes even death.

Let me be clear that that was not and is not a punishment for Rachel, it's not a punishment for individual women but we know that it's not how life is meant to be.

Bible doesn't let us get away from the fact that this is life outside the garden, life away from Bethel and it's deeply fallen because of sin.

[21:38] Of course that's true not only of death in childbirth but death full stop. There are not one, not two but three deaths and three burials that punctuate this chapter.

See Deborah in verse 8, Rachel verse 19, Isaac verse 29. It's just to remind us that the wages of sin, the reality of death is never far from the surface of life in our world or in God's family and neither is the root cause of that, verse 22.

Genesis just kind of drops the sin doesn't it? No comment, no explanation. When Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine. To rub salt in the wounds, not only as Rachel died but who Jacob loved.

But now his firstborn Reuben, Rachel's sister Leah's son, goes and sleeps with Rachel's servant who had also had some of Jacob's children. If you struggle to follow that, that's exactly right, isn't it? This family doesn't get much more messed up than that. EastEnders, Corrie, right, they can't match this, can they? Genesis would make the writers of our modern soaps blush.

[22 : 58] But the Bible is truer to life than what we see on our screens, isn't it? Our lives, our families are so confusing, chaotic, they're full of sin because we are full of sin.

Jacob hears about it, we don't know what he does, I guess because he doesn't really do anything. Maybe he felt that he was in the wrong, didn't have a leg to stand on. Maybe he was too grief-stricken to respond.

Maybe he'd given up caring who did what in his family, we don't know. But sin is running rampant through this family and there is nothing they can do about it.

See, friends, the problem with thinking we can hide away from a fallen world and stay safe from the chaos is that we take the problem with us. It's not just that the world is fallen out there, but we're okay in here, right?

We are fallen. God's family is stained with sin. It's not just that sin exists beyond these walls, is it? But sin exists within these walls and in our hearts.

[24 : 06] The world is fallen, we are fallen, we experience that every day through the wrongs that we do and have done to us, through grief, through pain, and ultimately through death.

Someone has said that the Bible doctrine of the fallen, of sin, is in some ways the easiest doctrine to preach because nobody needs to be persuaded that it's true. As we go through life, we know deep down that this isn't the way that the world is meant to be, it's not the way we're meant to be, but it is, and we are deeply broken, under a curse, full of things that are wrong on so many different levels.

perhaps some of you are feeling that particularly sharply today. But just think where this family's come from and who's with them as they go.

They're coming from the house of God with the track record of his constant faithfulness behind them. Genesis begins to use, doesn't it, Jacob's new name, Israel, confirming that what God has done in his life is real, and the change in him is real.

Jacob changes his youngest son's name, not to spite Rachel, but to correct her interpretation of things. This isn't a son of sorrow, but a son of strength, a son of the right hand, because God is telling a different story and a bigger and a better story than Rachel can see through her suffering.

[25 : 39] And then we get that full list of Jacob's 12 sons, don't we? A reminder of the promise that God has kept to grow this family. They're not quite as many as the sand by the sea yet, but they're well on their way.

The lesson? That while they walk through the valley of the shadow of death, they need fear no evil, because their covenant God is with them, and his rod and his staff, his love and his faithfulness still comfort, and keep them.

Over the last few months in this block of Genesis, we've wrestled again and again with those twin truths, haven't we? The utter carnage of our sin and its consequences for us and our world, and the constant faithfulness and grace of God to meet us in our sin and own us as his family and relentlessly love us and forgive us, protect and provide for us.

And the response that Genesis is looking for as we go is, therefore, to cling to him when the fallout from our sin is threatening to drag us away, to struggle with him when his ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts, and to keep walking with him and trusting him through our own and others' fallenness and failures.

As we go back out into a fallen world as fallen people, we're not leaving God behind in this building. If we're Christians, we're dwelling in him and we're walking with him.

[27 : 29] How can we do both? How do we live life in the world and live life in him? Well, because, friends, God has come and made his home in us.

He came to us in his son, Jesus Christ. The word became flesh and dwelled among us. But we did not want him. And as we poured out our anger and hate on him and made him suffer and nailed him to the cross, he was actually coming to live with us.

To make the way for us to live with him, he was taking the consequences of our sin on himself. He was absorbing that curse like a sponge. And he was suffering what we deserve.

So that as he died, he was paying the wages of our sin. What we owe. Serving our sentence for all our wrongdoing, all our sin and its fallout, being punished in our place, that is where God's promises come to full maturity.

And his covenant love and faithfulness are poured out fully at the cross. That Jesus rose from the dead, he returned to heaven, he poured out the Holy Spirit, not only to be God with us, but God in us.

[28 : 54] So that now as his family, we have something better than Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had. Because if anyone loves me, says Jesus, he will keep my word, and my father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

When will God give up on his fallen family? Friends, never.

Never. Because he is the faithful God of an unfaithful family in a fallen world. The God who keeps his promises, who rescues us from all our sins, and who is with us, and will keep us until he brings all his people safely home to himself.

And so, brothers and sisters, let us worship him, and let us walk with him as we go from here. And let's pray for his help as we do that. Let's pray. Gracious God, how we thank you that you are true to us when we're not true to you.

Father, we thank you that you call us back again and again. Lord, we do not deserve to know you and to be known by you, to love you or to be loved by you.

[30 : 32] We thank you, our Father, for sending Jesus, for keeping your promise to us that you would own us and that you would never let us go. Lord, we thank you that you have done so by putting the punishment for our sins on him, that he gladly carried our burden to the cross, and there he paid for it in full.

We thank you so much. We thank you for your Holy Spirit who keeps and guides us each day. And we pray, Lord, that in his power you would keep us walking with you and keep us living with you as our God.

Keep us turning from sin and turning to Christ, we ask, and this we ask in his name. Amen. Amen.