

The Problem with Christian Cakeism

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. Well, we have a great way of making up words when we need them in English language.

I don't know if you knew, I found out this week Shakespeare apparently added 1,700 new words to the English dictionary. Not bad. Kieran mentioned last Sunday evening, word of the year, last year, a new word, permacrisis, made up to describe the time that we live in. One of my favorite new words recently actually is the word cakeism. I wonder if you've heard the word cakeism. It's a word invented for when the spirit of the phrase, have your cake and eat it, becomes your kind of guiding policy. Two tempting options are in front of you. You have to choose one or the other, but you try to choose both. You want to save your cake and you want to eat it. You want to save money and you want to spend it. You want to be healthy and you want to eat cake. And instead of saying, well, it has to be one or the other, you say, no, I'm going to have it both ways.

And you try to have it both ways. But what happens? Well, we learn that for lots of things, much bigger and important things than cake, that simply can't be done. We just can't have it both ways. And we see with Abram this morning in Genesis that he needs to learn that lesson because Abram was a cakeist. He sets out in verse 10, trying to hold on to God's promise with one hand, while also trying to reach out, grasping at what the world offered with his other hand.

Now, what was it that God had promised him? Let's just think back a minute. Just look down at that promise with me in verse 1. Okay, do you remember the three N's we looked at last week?

The Lord said to Abram, go from your country, your people, and your father's household to the land. I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. So, God would multiply him and I will bless you.

[2 : 2 9] I will make your name great. So, God would magnify him so that he would be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you, I will curse. So, God would make him a mediator, a go-between, and all the peoples on earth would be blessed through you. So, God would bless Abram and his families in these ways, multiply him, magnify him, make him a mediator, so that God's blessing would come through them to every family on earth. So, remember, this is the next stage in God's great world rescue plan. And after pausing on the way, we saw Abram did go, didn't he, as God had told him to do. We finished last time with Abram in the land that God had promised him walking down through it, taking it all in, building these altars, thanking, worshiping God, calling on his name, trusting in him as God guided him. But our passage today starts with a challenge that will test Abram's new faith, which will turn into an opportunity for God to teach that lesson to Abram for the first time in Genesis, that he can't have it both ways when it comes to

God. It is either God's promise God's way, or it is our plans in our way. But it can't be both.

And Abram will learn that the hard way this morning, friends, so that we don't have to, so we might learn from what God says in his word. So then, let us see the problem with Christian cake-ism. Firstly, in a compromised faith. Now, the context of this is in verse 10. What's the challenge that Abram faces? Do you see it in verse 10? What's the challenge? There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.

So what's the challenge? Abram has gone to the place where God has shown him, and in that very place, there isn't enough food. Now, a famine is a big problem, isn't it? But there's a bigger problem, isn't there? Because what Abram saw in front of his eyes didn't look much like what God had promised him. God had said, go to where I show you, and I will bless you. But in that place where God said he would bless him, Abram is hungry, and there isn't any food. And so straight away, he's faced with this choice. To keep trusting God's promise, even though he couldn't see it fully right now, or to put that promise on the shelf and to try and sort it out by himself. And Abram's instinct is to shelf God's promise, isn't it? And to try and sort it himself. He leaves the land that God had shown him, and he goes instead to Egypt. And if you track his journey, the funny thing is, he kind of stopped short on his way to get rich, remember, in Haran. Then God took him into the land. He was in the land.

He was going through the land. And then he comes back out the other side of the land and carries on down to Egypt to get fed. And so Abram isn't working very hard, is he, to be blessed by God.

[6 : 19] That was never God's intention. It's God who's working very hard to try to bless Abram. If only he would just stay put in the place where God had put him, so that he might bless him. But he won't.

And now this doesn't mean that Abram's kind of given up completely on God's promise. We're told he goes to live there for a while, so he's planning to come back. But was that part of God's promise?

Whose strategy is this that Abram's following? This is something we're going to see again and again in Genesis, because it's something that we bump up against again and again in our own lives.

The challenge of clinging on to God's promise, even though we don't see it worked out fully yet. In some ways, this is the basic test of our faith, because faith is, by definition, confidence in what we hope for, assurance in what we do not see. That's Hebrews 11, verse 1.

And so every day we come up against this basic choice between living by faith, trusting in what God has told us, or living by sight, trusting in what we can see in front of us. And Abram, the father of the faithful, chooses at this point to trust in what he can see. There's a famine, so he's going to where there's food. It's as simple as that. And as so often with us, once his trust in God has been compromised, well, his life goes the same way. Now, can you imagine having this conversation he has in verse 11? It's ludicrous, isn't it? How would this go down with you? Okay, husbands, you're in the car, you turn to your wife, you say, darling, you're so beautiful.

[8 : 20] In fact, you're so beautiful that if anyone found out that you were my wife, they'd kill me so that they could marry you. So far, so good. But then it goes sour, doesn't it? So you say, can you do something for me? Look, just will you tell everyone that you're my sister so that they won't kill me? And so I'll be treated nicely because I've brought such a beautiful woman to live in their country. Hmm, not so sure. How would that go down if you had that conversation? This is not good, is it?

Where do we even start with this? Poor Sarai, this poor woman. Abram's basically telling her, when we get to where we're going, I'm planning to disown you.

You've come a long way, haven't we, from Adam's love song in the garden, when the first sinless person laid eyes on his new wife, what did he say? This at last is bone of my bones. This is flesh of my flesh, my wife, my love. Now Abram turns to his bride and says, won't you tell the world we're not married?

He also doesn't really think much of the Egyptians, does he? Notice he assumes that if the Egyptians find out that Sarai is his wife, naturally they'll kill him in cold blood and take her for themselves.

He doesn't have a very high view of his neighbors, does he? And he doesn't think much of God who had promised to protect him. Remember what he had said, those who curse you, I will curse.

[10 : 05] Where is his trust in that promise of God's protection? And so this whole plan is designed to bless only one person, isn't it? Himself.

Let's just have a look in verse 13, see that, say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake, and my life will be spared because of ye. Abram is interested in number one, isn't he?

It's completely self-serving. Now is that what God promised? Is that how God said he would bring about his blessing? Let's compare. God said he would grow Abram's family, but Abram's giving up his wife.

God said he would make Abram great, but Abram is plotting his own path to glory and greatness. God said through Abram, he would bless all peoples on earth. But here's Abram going into a neighboring country with a plan to deceive them for his own personal gain. God promised to bless this man so that he would be a blessing and bring God's blessing back to a fallen humanity. And so this blessing that God had promised was to bring ultimate good to others, not to twist it and use it to get a better life for himself. And yet, at the first sign of trouble, the very first test, Abram chooses to do it his own way. And it wrecks it, doesn't it? Because he couldn't see God's promise working there and then, in his immediate circumstances, in the way that he thought it would and should. And so he's living by what is right in front of him, and his heart ends up being as bad, if not worse, than the people who he imagines will do evil to him out in the big wide world. He wanted the blessing, but he wanted it on his terms, and it twisted his heart and his life into sin. And brothers and sisters, that is the problem with Christian cacism. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot have God's blessing his way and our plan our way. You know how many times have we listened to God's promise that in Christ, we have his rich, infinite and eternal blessing, and then looked at our own lives and circumstances and thought, but I can't really see it. This doesn't really look like God's blessing.

Your life looks and feels so hard, or just so normal. And how do we respond then? By trying to carve out a life for ourselves in our own way that looks a bit more like the life that we imagined, or by resting our faith in what God has said, trusting him to be as good as his word.

[13 : 35] We know God promises to save the lost through our everyday witness out in the world, but when following Christ singles us out as a bit weird or backwards or different in our class, in our work, in our friendship circles. Do we just try to blend in? Save Christ for a Sunday?

Not say anything? We hear God's promise to give us all that we need for life and for godliness, but when we're tempted by the life that we see in the world. When sin looks and feels really good, and we feel our own weakness, do we say, well, I can't put up a fight, I can't do any differently, I can't resist? We rely on God's promise to give us all that we need to live, but when something comes along that maybe threatens our finances, the dark cloud on the horizon, how quickly do we withdraw our generosity and stop sharing, stop giving, and start saving and hoarding?

And all the while, we wouldn't deny God's promises outright, would we? But our lives can tell a different story. God promises His blessing, trouble comes. What do we do? Often our heads say that we want God's promise, but our hearts can say, I want it my way. But friends, it can't be both.

Our self-preservation plans will always be self-serving plans. And here's the biggest danger. By verse 16, Abram's plan has worked. Did you notice? He's safe. He's rich. He's popular. He's comfortable. He looks to all the world like a picture of blessing, doesn't he? But he doesn't have God's blessing. He doesn't have God's blessing. He's not in the place God's shown him. His wife is sleeping in the palace of a foreign king, and he's conning the people that God has promised to deal with through him. He's living a fine life, but he's no longer living life by faith in God's promise.

And that could well be some of us here today, couldn't it? Perhaps you're really good at making life work. But are you so good at making life work for yourself that you're only trusting in God's Word in an intellectual way that never really impacts how you live, the decisions that you make, how you respond to trouble, crisis? How do we avoid doing that? Or when a trying situation comes along, tell yourself to finish this sentence. The only way this is going to go well for me is if I...

[16 : 39] what? What's the only way this is going to go well for you? Write it down. Make yourself say it.

And then put a line through it. And tell yourself instead, the only way this is going to go well for me is if I keep trusting in what God has promised. And whatever I do next, I need to do it with my faith resting in him and his word, trusting in his way, and not with my faith split between him and me, his way and my way. Friends, doing it our own way always leads to sin. It never, ever leads to true and lasting blessing. Not for us, not for others, because that true and lasting blessing only comes from the Lord. We can't have it both ways. A compromised faith can never bring God's blessing.

But the second problem with Christian cakeism is maybe a surprising one, because the problem is a committed God. So far, Abram's plans have worked wonderfully, but the Lord is about to graciously ruin the party. See that in verse 17. The Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and the household because of Abram's wife, Sarai. Now, we might be a bit uncomfortable with that, because these guys had no idea, did they? It was Abram and his wife who told them they were brother and sister.

And so, why then? Why is God punishing them and not Abram and his family? Well, because even though Abram is unfaithful, God is still faithful to his promise. The Lord curses the Egyptians because they have even unknowingly cursed Abram. I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you, I will curse.

Now, do you remember which of the three M's that promise stood for? What is God doing? He's making Abram a mediator, one to stand between God and humanity. Remember, God promised to deal with the world through this man. And so, sending plagues on Egypt, what is God saying? That he is still faithful to that promise, still dealing with the world through this man, still sticking to his plan.

[19 : 19] But here's the thing. That ruins everyone's party, doesn't it? The blissful ignorance is gone. Pharaoh is furious. What have you done to me, he said? Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? And Abram gets sent out of Egypt in disgrace, back to the place where there's a famine. There's a sense, isn't there, that everyone could have got on quite nicely if it hadn't been for God stepping in to rescue his covenant. It's a helpful reminder for us, I think, as to why it is sometimes that God does disrupt our plans. Everything's going so nicely. Why is God ruining that for me? Sometimes it is because our plans for our own comfort and convenience have sidetracked us away from what God is doing in our lives, what he intends for us in Christ. And he is completely committed, brothers and sisters, completely committed to having his people right in the center of his promise and his plans for the world.

And that is a problem for us. You often, why God frustrates our plans is a mystery to us. We need to say that. Okay, we can't presume to know why God does what he does in every instance. But we do know that when we have deafened ourselves to his voice, and when we have numbed ourselves to his will, God is too faithful not to come and shake us back out of that, back into the beating heart of his great save the world plan. Brothers and sisters, it's not easy when God does that.

It can't have been easy for Abram to be confronted by the king of Egypt on whom he had brought plagues. But it is wonderful that he does, because it shows that God is gracious enough that he would even step in to save us from ourselves. Not only is he gracious enough to promise us his blessing in Christ, he's gracious enough to bring us back to wholehearted commitment to his promise, despite the way that our hearts wander and our faith wavers. And so one problem with Christian cakeism, wanting to have it both ways, is that we have a committed God who doesn't settle for compromise.

But I think that the key point in this section is really to do with the mediator. God said his plan was to use Abram to bless every family of the earth. But here is that mediator.

And what is he like? He's getting kicked out of Egypt because of his sin against the people, having brought God's curse on this family. It's ironic, isn't it, that the man that Abram imagined would kill him if he knew his secret is the one who now stands over him accusing him of wrong?

[22 : 38] Why did you say she is your sister so that I took her for my wife? Pharaoh is actually seen to be more righteous than Abram. Abram's brought God's curse on this man by deceiving him into sin.

All the roles are reversed, aren't they? It even has an echo, doesn't it, of what the serpent did in the garden, a lie that led a family into sin. And so the question is, surely, has God got the right guy?

Is this really the one who's going to bring God's blessing to the world? Because only half a page after God promised to bless through him, he's managed to bring God's curse on a foreign king on a neighboring country with his sin. The covenant has blown up on the launch pad. But it hasn't, has it? Because God stepped in to save it. And so the point ends up being less whether God has got the right guy and more about whether this guy has the right God. We thought quite a lot last year in Genesis about the original hearers of this book, the distant descendants of Abraham, the family of Israel.

And now that family too, as they heard this story, were on their way out of an Egypt, destroyed by plagues into a land that God was showing them. And this showed them, if anything, that it's the fact that their rescue had nothing to do with them, nothing to do with who they were, and everything to do with who God is and what he had done. God was constantly reminding them, as he puts it in Deuteronomy chapter 9, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord, your God, is giving you this good land to possess. For you are a stiff-necked people.

It is not because you are good enough, said God. And now they can see that from the beginning, their family, their father had been openly sinful. Their fathers had not walked purely and perfectly by faith in God's promise. Their father Abraham didn't deserve God's blessing.

[25 : 09] But God gave him his blessing. He was giving them his blessing purely by his grace. It wasn't because their family was better than the royal family in Egypt. It wasn't because their faith was stronger than any other family's faith. It was simply and purely because of the God who had promised himself to them and brought them to trust in him, the Lord. And friends, nothing has changed as we look at Abram today as God's church. We are saved only because of the God who keeps his promise to us. We are only here. We are only here because God has been true to his plan to save us.

Not for our goodness. Not for our rightness. Not for our faithfulness. If God's purpose is rested in any way, in any way, on me or you, we would be lost. But praise God that he is totally committed to his promise to bring eternal blessing to every family of the earth through his better and more perfect mediator, Jesus Christ. Our faith is simply a closing of our fingers around Christ.

It doesn't matter how weak or strong our grip on him is. If we have closed our fingers around him by faith, his grip on us is unbreakable. How do we know? Because he is the true and perfect and sinless mediator between God and humanity. Abram's faith, his faithfulness will grow over the course of these chapters. He'll become a better mediator, more in line with God's purposes and promises.

But even at his best, as he is here at his worst, we need to see that Abram was only ever the shadow of the perfect mediator. One whose heart is set forever on bringing God's blessing to the world.

One who always chooses what is true and right and good. One who never lies or deceives us or tricks us.

[27 : 42] One who, far from preserving his own life, laid down his life that we might be blessed. One who, far from bringing God's curse on us, took God's curse on himself on the cross, bearing the punishment that we deserve for our unfaithfulness and sin, so that we would have the blessing that he deserves for his goodness and rightness. Is Abram really the mediator that the world needs to put us right with God? No. But he is the beginning of a family from which the true mediator would come, the Lord Jesus Christ, to put us right with God once and for all, so that we would be blessed forever in him. And that is how we know that however shaky our faith is, we are right with God if that faith is in the right person, Jesus Christ. Because he is unshakable, and he is the one who presents us to God, so that as God looks on me and you today, if we stand before him in Christ, what does he see?

Not our flakiness, not our fickleness, but rather the perfect rightness of his Son shining back at him.

Friends, it is as we respond to Jesus that God responds to us. As we put our trust in the Lord Jesus, that God rains down his blessing on us, not for who we are as we come, but for who he is.

If your trust is not in Christ today, let me say you can't come on your own. There is no other person who can bring you. I cannot bring you to God. There is only one right person who can bring us to God, and it is Christ. Abram shows us that we do not have it in ourselves to obey perfectly, to live to God rightly, and any other mediator will be just the same.

But there is one true, right, and perfect mediator, Jesus, who does bring God's blessing to us, who can bring you rightly to God. And in him, God has promised to remove his curse from you and give you his blessing forever. And so whoever we are, let us come to him today, whether it's for the first time or for the thousandth time, and let us pray that he would keep us living by faith in that promise of his word, living by faith in the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

[30 : 39] Let us come to him now as we pray together. Let's pray. God, our Father, how we thank you that though we are unfaithful, though, Lord, our faith is weak, though, Lord, so often we respond to challenges and trials in our own strength rather than in yours.

How we thank you that you accept us and receive us all for Jesus Christ. Father, how we thank you that we don't rely on imperfect means to come to you, but rather on he who is the way, the truth, and the life.

Father, we pray that as we see your faithfulness to Abraham played out in this man's life, that we would recognize your grace and love and faithfulness to us. Lord, we who have sinned against you, Lord, we thank you that you have brought us your blessing through Christ. Lord, we pray that blessing would continue to grow, that you would be pleased to bless, Lord, those who as yet do not know ye.

Lord, we pray that through our Christianity Explode course, we pray that each and every Sunday, Lord, as we gather together, we pray that, Lord, for those in our lives whom we know, who we would long to be one with Christ. Lord, we pray that you would grant faith and by your spirit that you would be pleased to bless every family of the earth in and through him. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.