

The Covenant of Faith

Genesis 15:1-21

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So Father's Day is one of those occasions that can bring a mixture of emotions. For some, it is a day of celebration. We remember our dads and our granddads and our stepdads, our godfathers, father figures who have loved us, encouraged us and helped shape our lives. But for others, today can be more difficult. Some are grieving fathers who are no longer with us. Some carry painful memories of their dads. Some long to be dads or to have children, and some have complicated family relationships.

But yet, wherever we find ourselves today, I think that this reading has something to say to us. Because it is a story about a man longing to become a father. It is a story about waiting, and it is a story about promises. And above all it is a story about faith in a God who keeps his covenant.

And as I was preparing for this talk, I found myself drawn to Abraham's honesty. He has received God's promises, yet years later he is still waiting. And perhaps some of us, I know I am, some of us know what that feels like.

So, our passage today begins with:

Genesis 15:1

'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.'

So, I wonder, why does God begin with “do not be afraid”? And I wonder whether that is because beneath Abraham's faith, there is actually fear. He has obeyed God's call on his life. He has left everything familiar behind him. Yet the promise of a son still seems totally impossible, given his age as well.

And sometimes we think that faith means never really being afraid. We do not need to be afraid because we have faith. I do not think that that is actually the case. Because actually, courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is trusting God despite the fear.

And I think many fathers know this. There is that old story about a dad teaching his son to ride a bike. And the child is terrified of falling off the bike. So, the dad runs along, and he is holding on to the saddle as the child is riding along. And then he lets go and the child carries on riding. And then he realises that his dad is not there and he stops and he falls off and he says to him, “Dad, you let go! You let go and now I fell off.” And the dad smiles and he says, “No, I did not let go. I was right behind you the whole time.”

And **that is often how God works. When we think that we are alone, he has never stopped holding us.**

And then Abram responds:

Genesis 15:2

‘Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless...?’

And what I love about Abram is that he is honest. He does not pretend. He does not hide his disappointment. And he brings it directly to God.

One of the most powerful examples of this comes from the life of C. S. Lewis. After the death of his wife, Joy, he wrote a book called *A Grief Observed*. I do not know if anybody here has heard of the book or read it. Because in this book, C. S. Lewis records his anger and his confusion and his sorrow. And at times he even questions where God is. Yet what makes this book so moving, is that C. S. Lewis keeps talking to God. He keeps talking to him throughout it. His questions become part of his faith journey.

Faith is not pretending that everything is fine. Because quite often, and quite frankly, it is not. But faith is bringing everything to God because we trust him enough to be honest with him. We trust him enough to be able to say, 'You know what? this is really rubbish right now. And I really could do with a hand. Where are you when I need you right now?'

So perhaps some of us need permission to bring our real questions to God, rather than just praying and saying 'thank you for this' and 'thank you for that' and 'I will pray for this and I will pray for that.' Actually, maybe we need to be real with God and say that we are struggling with things because God can take it.

In verse 5 of our reading, God takes Abram outside and tells him to look at the stars. And I think the imagery of this is so beautiful. I was reading it over and over again.

He took him outside and said:

Genesis 15:2

⁵ He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.'

So, he recognises that actually he might not be able to do that. But look at the stars and count them. I just think that this whole image, of a father taking his child outside to look at the stars and reminding him about what is possible – ‘Look at this! Look at all of the stars.’ - I think it is so beautiful. Makes me quite emotional.

I know that I am not a dad, I am a mum. But I have done that with my children. ‘Look at the stars. Look how amazing this is. Look at what God has done.’

Abram sees what he does not have, but God sees what he will become. And sometimes faith means learning to see ourselves through God's eyes rather than our current circumstances. Because God sees us and he sees the future.

On Friday night Millie, my daughter, took me to go and listen to Ellie Kildunne speak in Bristol on the day that she was announced as signing for Bristol Bears (sorry to any Bath fans). I am slightly excited about this because I am a Bristol girl (‘you can take the girl out of Bristol, but you cannot take the Bristol out of the girl’). So, we were all very excited. I will say the whole place erupted when she said that she was signing for Bristol Bears.

Now, many of us know Ellie now as one of the world's best rugby players. She actually said on Friday night that she does not want to be known as one of the best rugby players. The *best* rugby player is what she said. And I have great faith in her. And she is somebody who has achieved extraordinary success and inspired countless people through her performances.

But listening to her speak on Friday, what struck me was not simply the trophies and the achievements that she has won.

It was hearing about the commitment behind all of her success. She left home at 16 years old to go to play rugby. So, what I heard from her was, the setbacks that she had faced, the discipline that she had to live through in her life, the sacrifices that she has made for her sport and for her dedication, and the willingness to keep going when success was not guaranteed. The willingness to keep going not knowing where she was going. When she left Quins before she had signed for Bristol Bears, she did not know what she was doing and where she was going.

But nobody becomes an international athlete overnight, do they. There are early mornings when nobody is watching. There are disappointments. There are injuries. And there are moments when the goal feels a very, very long way away. Yet she spoke about continuing to believe in what was possible and continuing to work towards a vision of what could be. It was such an inspiring talk that she gave.

And as I listened to her on Friday night, I found myself thinking about Abram standing beneath the stars. God was asking him to trust a promise that seemed totally impossible, to keep believing before he could see the outcome and to hold on to a vision that only God could fully see. And I found myself thinking about that as I was listening to Ellie, this amazing rugby player.

And of course there is a difference. Ellie's success has come through years of hard work and talent and determination on her behalf. And Abram's promise could only come through God's intervention. But both of these things, Ellie and Abram, both remind us of an important truth. **If we only live by what we can see today, we will never step into what might be possible for tomorrow.** We will just stay here. Because faith lifts our eyes. Faith helps us to see beyond the present moment of what is happening right now. **Faith trusts that God is still working even when we do not think he is. Even when the fulfilment of his promises seems so far off. God is still working.**

Then we come to an important passage:

Genesis 15:6

6 Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Now notice what this verse does not say - You will hear me say this quite a lot, what it does not say, because this is what I notice. This is the way that my brain works - It does not say that 'Abram understood everything.' It does not say that 'Abram had no doubts.' It does not say that 'Abram never struggled.' It simply says that 'Abram *believed*.' He believed.

I met a man in the hospital about a year or so back who attended church for many years, not this church, and he described himself as a very ordinary Christian. I do not think there is ever such a thing, to be honest. And he was coming towards the end of his life, sadly. So, I asked him what had sustained him in his faith through the ups and downs of his life. And the answer that he gave was so beautiful because he simply said, 'I have discovered that God is more faithful than I am.'

Is that not amazing? There is me at a hospital bedside trying to give somebody comfort as they are coming towards the end of their life, and then he goes and says that to me, and I had to hold back the tears. 'God is more faithful than I am.' Is that not incredible? It is not about great achievements. It is not about perfect discipleship. It is just about our confidence in God's faithfulness.

Is that not the story of all of us. Is that not the story of all of us. We may stumble, we may question, we may fail. But God remains faithful to all of us. It is incredible.

So, we have this beautiful moment in this, about the stars and God's promises, and we are all feeling very lovely. And then comes this strange covenant ceremony. As a vegetarian it is not my most joyful thing that I read, I will say. Animals are divided and laid out. It is all not very nice really. And Abram waits.

I read up on this ceremony. In the ancient world, two people making a covenant would normally walk between the pieces together. Both parties would make the promise. But here is the strange thing that happens in this, that Abram falls asleep. The smoking fire pot and the blazing torch represent God's presence in that moment. And God is saying, 'This covenant depends on me.'

Imagine how reassuring that would have been. Because Abram knew his own weaknesses, and so do we know our own weaknesses. We all have them.

One of the most moving examples of covenant faithfulness comes from the story of John Newton, the writer of Amazing Grace. He spent years involved in the slave trade before his dramatic conversion. And looking back over his life, he famously said, 'Although my memory is fading, I remember two things very clearly. I am a sinner, and Christ is a great saviour.'

John Newton understood that salvation rests not on our faithfulness to God, but on God's faithfulness to us. And I believe that that is exactly what Genesis 15 is teaching us today.

On Father's Day, this passage reminds us that every earthly father is imperfect. And some of you will know that feeling, who are here. Maybe some of you might be looking back and wish that you had said things maybe slightly differently. Done things slightly differently. Spent more time maybe with somebody. Been more patient with people, with our dads. The truth is that no father ever gets it completely right all the time.

But Father God's covenant points us to our heavenly Father. The Father who never forgets. The Father who never abandons. The Father whose love never ever runs dry.

A friend of mine told me this story of an elderly man living with dementia who lived in her village, and she was friends with his daughter. And as his memory deteriorated, he gradually forgot names. It was very sad. He forgot the names and he forgot places and even family members. And one day his daughter asked him whether he remembered who she was, and he looked at her slightly confused and he could not really answer, and it made her very sad. And then she asked him, Dad, do you remember Jesus. And his face lit up and he smiled and he said, 'Oh yes.' And then he said, 'He has not forgotten me.'

Is that not amazing. This is covenant faith. Not that we always remember God perfectly, but that God always remembers us perfectly.

We cannot read Genesis 15 without seeing Jesus. The God who walked through the covenant pieces would one day walk to the cross. The covenant God made with Abram reaches its fulfilment in Christ. At the cross, God takes upon himself the consequences of humanity's failure. The promise that is given under the stars in that beautiful imagery is secured through the sacrifice of Jesus. And because of that, **our hope rests not in our own ability to hold on to God. It rests on God's determination to hold on to us.**

So today on Father's Day, perhaps God is saying to us what he said to Abram. Perhaps he is saying, 'Do not be afraid.' Some of us are waiting. Some of us are worrying. Some are carrying burdens that nobody else sees. We are very good at that. And some are wondering whether God's promises will ever come to pass.

So, I think today that this passage is telling us to lift our eyes. Look beyond the immediate circumstances that we find ourselves in. Remember the stars. It is going to be a clear night tonight. Go out and look at the stars. Remember the covenant. Remember the cross.

On Friday, Ellie spoke about perseverance, commitment and believing in a goal worth pursuing. Abram teaches us something similar spiritually. Faith is not believing that we are strong enough. Faith is believing that God is faithful enough. The covenant of faith rests not on our ability to keep hold of God, but on God's promise never to let go of us. And because of that, whatever lies ahead for any of us, we can trust in him.



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