

Trust and Obedience

Genesis 17:15-26

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So, I don't know about you, but I think that there is something deeply unsettling about not knowing what's coming next. Most of us actually like certainty, don't we? We like plans. We like calendars filled in months in advance. We like to know where we are going and how we're going to get there. And we like to feel that we are in control. My children have just finished school. So, there is the school calendar on our kitchen cupboards now. So, I know exactly what they're doing throughout the whole summer. We like to be in control. We like to know what's going on.

But yet, if we're honest, the life of faith rarely works out like that. God seldom gives us the whole map. Often, he simply asks us just to take the next step. And that has always been the way of God. When he called Noah, he didn't tell him when the rain was going to stop. When he called Moses, he didn't tell him every obstacle that lay ahead. When he called Mary, he didn't explain every sorrow that would come with saying 'yes.' And when Jesus called the disciples, he simply said 'follow me.'

And here, in Genesis 17, we meet Abraham, once again, on that same journey of faith. By this point Abraham had been walking with God for nearly 25 years, leaving his homeland in obedience to God's call for him. 25 years of extraordinary promises, 25 years of waiting, 25 years of learning that faith is not built on a single dramatic moment, but shaped over a lifetime of trusting God. And that perhaps is one of the first lessons this passage teaches us. Faith is rarely formed in an instant. Faith is formed in the waiting. So, it's easy to admire Abraham because we know how the story ends. We know that Isaac will be born, and we know that God will keep his promise (spoiler alert!).

But Abraham doesn't know that. Abraham doesn't know that yet. He stands in the middle of this story where everything still seems completely impossible.

And perhaps, actually, some of us are standing there today. Some of us are waiting maybe for healing. Some of us are waiting for reconciliation. Some of us are waiting for direction. Some of us are waiting for answers to prayers that have been offered for years. Some of us are simply wondering what chapter God is writing next in our lives.

But this passage reminds us that we worship a God who is just as present in the waiting as he is in the fulfilment.

One of the most beautiful truths in this passage is that everything begins with God. Notice who speaks first. It's not Abraham, it's God. Notice who makes the promise. It's not Abraham, it's God. And notice who establishes the covenant. It's not Abraham, it's God.

So, again and again, throughout Genesis 17, we hear those remarkable words: 'I will bless,' 'I will give,' 'I will establish,' 'I will be their God.' 'I will,' he says. Those little words tell us something profound about the nature of God.

Because the covenant doesn't begin with human achievement. It begins with grace.

The Bible is, from beginning to end, the story of a God who always takes the first step towards humanity. When Adam and Eve hid in the garden, God came looking for them. When Israel cried out in slavery, God came to rescue them. When the world wandered far from him, God sent his son. Grace always moves first. So, the gospel doesn't 'say climb high enough and perhaps you'll reach God.' The gospel says 'God has come down to us.' Everything starts with him. Everything depends on him and everything is sustained by him.

That was true for Abraham and it's true for us today.

Genesis reminds us that before Abraham does anything, God speaks grace to him.

Obedience matters, faithfulness matters, holiness matters, but they are never the foundation for God's love. They're always the response to it. We obey because we are loved. We do not obey in order to be loved. And that's the heartbeat of the gospel.

One detail in today's reading has always touched me whenever I've read it. God turns his attention to Sarah and he says, 'As for Sarah, your wife.' Those five words are so tender, full of tenderness. For years, Sarah has lived beneath the weight of disappointment. Every month, another reminder that she remained childless. Every year, another reminder that time was slipping away from her. In that culture, infertility carried enormous shame. People would have assumed that God had somehow withheld his blessing. Imagine the question Sarah must have asked. 'Has God forgotten?'; 'Has his promise to me failed?'; Had she misunderstood everything?

Perhaps some of those questions sound familiar to us. Not because we all know infertility, but because we all know disappointment.

There are dreams that never came true, prayers that still seem unanswered, people we miss desperately, doors that unexpectedly close, plans that are unravelled. There are seasons when life looks nothing like we imagined it would.

Yet this passage reminds us that God speaks Sarah's name. He hasn't forgotten her.

One of the most repeated commands in the Bible is, 'do not be afraid.' Not because there's nothing to fear, but because God is present in the midst of our fears. He knows every hidden tear, every unanswered question, and every silent prayer that we pray. The God who speaks Sarah's name is the same God who knows ours. Isaiah would later write in chapter 43:

Isaiah 43:1

¹ 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.'

Aren't these wonderful words? Our names are known to him before our circumstances change, and our identity rests not in what we've achieved but in whose we are. That's what's important.

Then comes a moment that I think is so human, it's so real...because Abraham laughs.

And can we blame him? Can we blame him, really? He's 99 years old, and Sarah is almost 90. So, I'm not surprised that he laughed at what was going on. Everything his experience has taught him says the promise cannot happen.

Yet God often works precisely where human possibilities end.

Because God's promises are never limited by human probability.

We've seen the same pattern over and over again. The Red Sea opens; manna falls from heaven; David defeats Goliath; dry bones live again; A virgin conceives; and a stone is rolled away.

The impossible has always been God's speciality. Not because God delights in a spectacle, but because impossible situations reveal his glory.

If everything could be explained by human strength, human wisdom or human planning, quite frankly we would be tempted to worship ourselves wouldn't we.

But instead, God works in a way that leaves no doubt that his hand is at work.

When I was preparing for this talk, I kept hearing the words of Proverbs, which is why we had our Proverbs reading today:

Proverbs 3:5-6

5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;

6 in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

Now, they are very easy words to have as a lovely picture on your wall. They're very easy to look at and think 'oh how lovely.' But they are very difficult to live.

And if I'm honest, my own life has rarely followed the route that I would imagine.

Growing up in an army family meant becoming familiar with change from an early age. Home was never quite as settled as I sometimes longed for it to be. My dad was often away, and as a child, you learn quite quickly that life can change without asking your permission.

I didn't realise that God was quietly teaching me something about trust. Not the trust that comes from knowing every detail of the future, but trust that comes from knowing the one who holds the future. And as I would discover in later years, how important that lesson would become for me. The trust God was teaching me as a child would be tested in ways that I could never ever imagine.

There have been moments in my life when the words of proverbs have not been comforting verses on a page, but actually a lifeline to hold on to.

Because some experiences change you forever. Some experiences cannot be neatly explained away with easy answers, or comforting cliches. Pain and hurt has a way of stripping everything back, exposing what we really believe about God.

Because it's one thing, isn't it, to trust God when life is going well. But it is completely different to trust him when your heart is breaking.

So, I've discovered that faith is not pretending that everything is all right. So let that be a comfort to you as well. It's okay that everything is not alright.

Faith is bringing our broken hearts honestly before the Lord, and discovering that he is still faithful even when we cannot understand his ways.

David cried out in confusion; Job cried out in anguish; Even Jesus, hanging on the cross, prayed the words of Psalm 22:

Psalm 22:1
(Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34)

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Our faith has never required us to deny our pain. Instead it invites us to bring our pain into the presence of God, who knows suffering himself.

The cross tells us that we worship not a distant God who watches suffering from afar, but a God who enters into it.

In Jesus, God has experienced rejection, loss, grief, and death.

And that means there is nowhere that we can go where Jesus has not already gone before us.

When Proverbs tells us to 'trust in the Lord with all your heart', it is not asking us to switch off our emotions or ignore our questions. It's inviting us to place those questions into the hands of a God whose love has already been demonstrated on Calvary.

There are still things that I don't understand. There are prayers that I cannot answer. But I have learned that God's faithfulness is not measured by whether he explains everything to us. It is measured by the cross and the empty tomb.

The cross tells me that he loves me. The resurrection tells me that suffering and death never ever have the final word, and that's why I continue to trust him.

At the end of today's reading something remarkable happens. After hearing God's astonishing promise, Abraham acts. And verse 23 simply says: that very day, Abraham.

Genesis 17:23

23 On that very day Abraham...

There's something beautiful about these words. There's no delay, there's no bargaining, there's no waiting until Isaac arrives, no demand for another sign. He just simply obeys.

And that doesn't mean that Abraham suddenly understood everything (he most certainly probably didn't).

But obedience is not the reward for understanding. Obedience is the fruit of trust.

Sometimes we think if God would just explain everything, then we would gladly obey him. 'Show me the way, Lord, and I will do whatever you want to do.' It doesn't quite work like that does it. Because what we learn from the Bible is that God consistently turns that upside-down.

Think of Noah building the ark when there was no rain. Think of Joshua marking marching around Jericho instead of attacking it. Think of the disciples leaving their fishing nets without knowing where Jesus would lead them. Think of Mary saying:

Luke 1:38

³⁸ 'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.'

Mary didn't know the cost that lay ahead.

Obedience nearly always comes before understanding.

That's why Proverbs says, 'lean not on your own understanding.'

That's not to say that our understanding is unimportant. God has given us minds to think, wisdom to discern, and reason as a gift.

But it does say that our understanding is not the foundation of our faith.

The foundation of our faith is God.

There are times when our circumstances will make no sense. There are seasons when God's timing will seem painfully slow. There will be prayers that appear unanswered. There will be doors that close. There will be paths we would never choose for ourselves.

Yet, even there, God is at work.

One of my favourite verses in the New Testament is in Romans 8. I've got it on a coaster by my bed that I put my cup of tea on. It says:

Romans 8:28

28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Notice here that Paul doesn't say that 'all things are good.' Loss is not good; suffering is not good; sin is not good; death is not good.'

But God is so sovereign and so gracious that he can weave even the darkest threads into his redeeming purposes.

So, looking back over my own life I can see moments when I questioned what God was doing. At the time I only saw confusion. Now I can see his fingerprints on my life. The difficult childhood taught me resilience. The deepest grief taught me compassion. The disappointments taught me dependence. Even the failures in my life taught me humility. I would never have chosen those experiences. But I would not be the person that I am today without what God has done through them. And perhaps many of us could say the same.

Often, we understand God's lead-in only by looking backwards. Rarely while we are walking through it. That's why faith is always lived forward but understood backwards. Abraham couldn't see Isaac. Sarah couldn't see the nations.

All they could see was the next step. And that was enough. Because they knew the one who had made the promise.

Abraham's story doesn't end in Genesis 17. In many ways, it's only just the beginning. The promise of Isaac will come. There will be further moments of testing. There will be failures and victories, tears and laughter, fear and courage. Abraham will continue to learn that walking with God is not a single act of faith, but a lifetime of trust in the one who is always faithful.

And perhaps that is one of the greatest encouragements for each one of us, because God is not looking for perfection. Thankfully, he is looking for faithfulness.

Sometimes we can fall into the trap of thinking that God uses extraordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things. Yet when we read these words carefully, we discover something very different.

Because God uses ordinary people who are willing to trust him.

Abraham was ordinary. Sarah was ordinary. Moses doubted. David failed. Peter denied Jesus. Thomas doubted the resurrection. Paul carried his thorn in the flesh.

The Bible is not a gallery of spiritual superheroes. It is the testimony of God's extraordinary grace working through ordinary broken people.

And that should be really encouraging to each one of us. Because if God's purposes depended on our perfection, none of us would have any hope. Instead, they depend on his faithfulness.

The covenant with Abraham rests upon God's promise. And the new covenant rests upon God's Son. So, these readings take on an added significance, because we gather not only around God's word, but around God's call.

So, I just wanted to share some words for Claire as she begins her curacy with us.

The first one's 'welcome.' Welcome to the one of the greatest privileges anyone can receive. And also welcome to one of the greatest adventures that you'll ever have. Because ministry is never simply a career. It's a calling, and a calling is something that continually invites us to trust.

At the beginning of my curacy, three years felt like an eternity. I felt like I had all the time in the world. There was so much to learn, so many new experiences, so many firsts. The first baptism; the first funeral; the first wedding; the first difficult pastoral conversation; the first sermon that I walked away from thinking, 'I wish I could preach that one again' (my first one was Balaam's donkey); the first time someone asked a question to which I genuinely had no answer.

But three years seemed so long, so I didn't need to worry. And now I find myself standing at the end of curacy, and I find myself wondering where the time has gone. The truth is, I still don't know exactly what the next chapter looks like. There are decisions still to be made, doors still to be opened, and questions still unanswered.

And yet, strangely, in the last few weeks, I've discovered a deeper peace than I had at the beginning of the year as my curacy ended. Not because I know the future any better (because I don't) but because I know God better.

And that's what curacy does. It teaches you that ministry is never about having everything under control and it teaches you that God's strength really is made perfect in weakness. It teaches you that you cannot carry God's church on your own because it never belonged to us in the first place.

Jesus is the chief shepherd. Jesus builds his church. Jesus changes hearts and Jesus saves people. We just simply have the privilege of joining in what he is already doing.

So, my prayer for Claire is that you always remember that. When the attendance in a church service may seem disappointing - that you remember that. Or when the sermons that you preach don't quite connect to the people that you are preaching to - that you remember that. Or when pastoral situations become really complicated and you wonder 'how on earth did I get myself into this?' - that you remember that. When criticism comes (and at some point, it will) - that you remember that. When you feel inadequate, especially when your confidence rests in yourself and exhausts you - that you remember that.

If your confidence rests solely in Jesus, ministry will become an act of worship every single day. You have this whole church that is here for you. One of the greatest gifts that they will ever give you is prayer. This church, these people don't give unrealistic expectations. They will pray faithfully for you, they will encourage you generously, and they will forgive you quickly, and they will allow you room to grow.

Remember that curacy is a time of learning. Every minister that I have known remembers those who encouraged them in their early years. So never ever underestimate the power of a kind word after a service from these lovely people. And never underestimate the ministry of one of them saying, 'I'm praying for you.'

Because ministry has never been about the one individual in the church. It is about the whole body of Christ growing together as we do.

Paul reminds us that each member has a part to play. Some of us preach. Some of us teach. Some pray. Some welcome wonderfully on the doors. Some quietly visit people at home. Some quietly serves behind the scenes where nobody would notice.

But every single ministry in this church and in all churches matter because every member belongs to Christ.

And perhaps the greatest lesson Abraham teaches us is this: that God rarely reveals the whole journey. But he does reveal the next step.

And that has certainly been true in my own life. Looking back now, I can see that every season, even the painful ones, has prepared me for something that came afterwards. The uncertainty of childhood taught me dependence. The heartbreak of losing my twin sons deepened my compassion for those who grieve. And the journey through curacy has taught me that God is faithful, even when the future remains hidden. And like I said, I would never choose every one of those chapters, but I wouldn't remove them either, because every chapter has revealed something more of God's faithfulness in my life.

And perhaps that's true for many of us here today. When we look back over our lives, we can often trace God's hand more clearly than we could ever see it at the time. Like Abraham, we discover that the road we discover that the road was never random. The shepherd was leading us all along. The God who called Abraham is faithful. The God who remembered Sarah is faithful. The God who sustained me through childhood, through loss, through painful conversations and through curacy is faithful. The God who has brought each one of us here today is faithful and the God who calls us will equip us, sustain us and never leave us. Paul writes to the Philippians:

Philippians 1:6

⁂ he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

That is our confidence. That is our hope and that is our gospel.

So today, let's go from this place trusting not in ourselves, but in the God whose covenant never ever fails. Walking not by sight, but by faith, and following the one who is the way, the truth, and the life.



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