

Faith or Faithfulness

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 August 2023

Preacher: Joshua Russell

[0 : 0 0] Good morning, brothers and sisters. Please keep your Bibles open there, and you'll find an outline of my talk. If you're visiting with us, there's an outline, hopefully, that'll help you follow along inside your bulletins.

I want to begin this morning by just teasing out the differences between faith and faithfulness. So I think the difference is absolutely crucial for our understanding of this passage this morning.

In the first place, faith just means to rely or depend on someone. So you can put your faith in a chair. You can put your faith in a spouse, or in a politician, or in a scientist, or a journalist, or whoever.

Meaning that you're relying on them and what they've told you. You believe your spouse will keep her promises. You are confident that this scientist knows what he's talking about, or that this journalist is telling you the truth.

Which may not be a wise idea. But anyway, that's faith. Faith is when you take someone at their word. Now, faithfulness, I think, is a little bit more tricky.

[1 : 0 7] On the one hand, faithfulness can mean to be worthy of faith. And so God is faithful. That is, he keeps his word. He can be relied upon. He will not mislead you or deceive you.

He cannot lie. So you can always trust him. When a spouse commits adultery, we say he or she has been unfaithful. That is, they have not kept their word.

They have betrayed their spouse. And it's hard to trust someone like that again. But here's where things start to get a little bit complicated, I think. Because we use the word faithful in a very different way as well.

Whereby, what we mean is, somebody who consistently has faith. Right? So not someone who is reliable themselves, necessarily, but someone who consistently trusts another.

And that starts to make things a little bit confusing, I think. For instance, when we talk about a faithful football fan. Do we mean someone who consistently trusts their team? Or someone who always, you know, believes their team will win the day, no matter how dire the circumstances?

[2 : 1 3] Or do we mean someone who the team can always rely on? The team can always trust to be there, barracking for them. Now, ordinarily in the Christian life, just to add a slight bit of complexity to this as well, faith leads to faithfulness.

That is, when we put our trust in God, we become trustworthy ourselves. I think of it like an anchor. Right? The important thing about an anchor, of course, is where it's anchored, and what it's anchored to.

It's no good having a strong anchor if you've dropped it into sort of shifting sands. And likewise, you might be someone with really strong faith.

But if your faith is not in God, then you'll just flip and flop and float along with the tide of the culture around you. Whereas, when you put your faith in God, when you tether yourself to God, because He is a steadfast rock, because He is faithful, then you will be faithful as well.

You will be able to stand solid as well. But what about if you don't consistently trust God? And who does?

[3 : 25] We all go through times of doubt, don't we? Of weakness and wandering and worry. Even the best of us. We rely on God when the waters are calm, but when storms approach, we panic and we look for safety somewhere else.

We come down from the spiritual mountains and we walk through the valleys. We fear death. We fear men. We fear humiliation.

And we discover our anchor is not so tightly tethered to God as we once thought that it was. It starts to wobble. So what does God's Word have to say to us in these moments?

And I think the crucial thing to understand about this passage then is that while Abraham, or Abram, I'm going to keep making that mistake, Abram was a man of faith.

He was justified by faith. He wasn't exactly faithful. I mean, his faith persevered. So in that sense, he never lost his faith altogether.

[4 : 29] But in scene after scene in this book, Abram's faith goes up and down. It wobbles and wobbles. And the key question becomes, what will Abram's faithlessness mean for God's covenant with him?

Has Abram now forfeited the promises God made to him? Remember in chapter 15 last week, when Abram believed God, remember God counted it to him as righteousness.

So now the question is, now that Abram has failed to believe God, will God count it to him as unrighteousness?

And will his unrighteousness nullify the covenant? Well, let's find out together. Now, following the pattern set up in chapter 15, we are expecting Abram to demonstrate faith in chapter 16.

You might remember last week, in the first half of the chapter, God made a promise to Abram. Abram responded with a question. Then God gave him further words of assurance.

[5 : 36] And then Abram responded in faith. In chapter 15, verse 6, Abram believed the Lord and he counted it to him as righteousness. And then in the second half of the chapter, we actually saw the same pattern unfold again.

Right? God made a promise to Abram. Abram responded with a question. Then God gave him further words of assurance. In fact, a startling demonstration of his commitment to bless him.

When Abram slept and, you know, the fire pot and the flaming torch went through the hacked up animal pieces, as if to say, you know, Abram, God was saying, come what may, Abram, I will keep my covenant with you.

No matter what, I would rather die than break my covenant with you. And then we expect Abram to respond in faith. But he doesn't in chapter 16.

In chapter 16, Abram stumbles. In fact, worse than that, he falls. Again, I don't mean he loses faith altogether, but he does fail miserably to trust God in this chapter.

[6 : 40] The precipitating factor is his lack of an offspring. So over the last few chapters, for the most part, we've been focusing on the land.

But after chapter 15, the offspring becomes the dominant theme. And in verse 1, you see the problem. Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children.

We might say, had still borne him no children. And Sarai, by now, is in her late 70s. She's well and truly past the age of childbearing. I think fear often plays on ambiguities, doesn't it?

And God has never explicitly mentioned Sarai in any of the promises to Abram so far. It's sort of been implied, maybe. After all, Sarai is Abram's wife.

But has it ever really been confirmed, even for the reader? We know that the child will come from Abram's body. That's how God put it to him. But what about Sarai?

[7 : 45] So, Sarai had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai got to thinking to herself in verse 2. Look at what she says to Abram. Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children.

Go into my servant, it may be that I shall obtain children by her. Now, Sarai's first thought is right and wrong. That the Lord has prevented me from bearing children.

Well, that's right. I mean, she recognizes that God is in control. When we talk about Abram's or Sarai's faithlessness in this chapter, it's not that they've entirely forgotten about God.

They're not starting to doubt his existence, are they? Or his sovereignty. In fact, that's part of what's hurting Sarai so much. She knows God is in control. Later on in the Bible, when Hannah is described as barren, the narrator says in 1 Samuel 1, verse 5, that the Lord had closed her womb.

So I think that's just an obvious, established fact for experienced Bible readers that God is always in control of the big things, of the little things, of the good days and the bad days.

[9 : 00] Whenever suffering or pain happens, that's not an indication that God has lost control. No, what Bible readers have to grapple with, what is often confusing and comforting is that somehow it's all part of God's plan, all of those things.

So Sarai's right about that. But of course, Sarai's wrong about how she responds to God's sovereignty. She kind of tries to read God's will, not from his word, but from her circumstances.

She assumes that because thus far God has prevented her from bearing children, that somehow that must mean it's time for her to act and to bring about God's purposes herself.

And she resorts to an outrageous method. And just as an aside, really, I think this really is a crucial thing to understand about God's guidance. We know what God wants us to do, not because the stars align or coincidences happen or doors open and close or we have profoundly emotional experiences that seem to push us in different directions.

No, we know what God wants us to do because he speaks. He makes promises. And he's told us what he wants from us in the Bible. I remember someone mentioning to me years ago, maybe my parents, that when Jonah arrived at Joppa, you know, there was a boat there ready to take him in just the direction he wanted to go.

[10 : 30] But that doesn't mean he should have boarded it. Well, here Sarai thought she'd found just the perfect solution to her problem. But of course it wasn't and what she sets about to do was profoundly wrong.

So, she's not looking for a sign from heaven or anything like that, but she sees an opportunity in front of her and she takes it. The other thing that's interesting about Sarai's comment, though, is that if Hagar has a child, Sarai expects to claim her as her own.

You see that? So, go into my servant, she says, which is obviously a euphemism for going to her tent and sleeping with her. Go into my servant. It may be that I shall obtain children by her.

So, because Hagar is Sarai's slave, not just her employee, but Hagar belongs to Sarai as a kind of personal maidservant, any children she bears will also be Sarai's children.

Now, that might sound quite strange to us, but there are various legal codes from the ancient Near East that legislate for exactly this kind of thing. So, there's pretty good evidence that this was quite a normal way of understanding the maidservant-mistress relationship.

- [11 : 57] Sarai wants to bear the promised offspring. She understands what God has promised Abram, but because now it just seems so impossible, she's decided to use the means, the legal means, at her disposal to make it happen.

And Abram agreed that it was a good solution. Let's see verse 2. And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. Now, that line, of course, should ring alarm bells for us.

What does that remind you of? Yeah, it's pretty ominous, isn't it? In Genesis 3, verse 17, after the fall, God said to Adam, because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree.

In other words, Abram is behaving like his ancestor. We had hoped, if you remember, that Abram would be a fresh start for humanity with God's promises to bless him, to make him a great nation.

We had hoped that Abram would be fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth and so on. A new Adam. But actually, he's just like the old Adam who went before him.

- [13 : 15] Instead of listening to God, Abram listened to the voice of his wife as she led them both into sin. In verse 3, so after Abram had lived 10 years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar, the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram, her husband, as a wife.

Now, notice again, Sarai is behaving just like Eve before her. If you can imagine seeing all of this in a movie, I think at this point there'd be a split screen.

or a flashback. As Eve takes the fruit, Sarai takes Hagar. As Eve gives the fruit to her husband, Sarai gives Hagar to her husband.

Notice we're told again that Sarai is Abram's wife. That might seem sort of redundant because we know that. But obviously, it stresses the point that what Sarai is doing here is wrong.

Abram already has a wife. And God's plan from the very beginning was for one man and one woman to come together as one flesh. Bigamy and polygamy is clearly a perversion of the original plan that was first adopted by men from Cain's line.

- [14 : 30] Lamech, if you remember, who was a vicious thug of a man. We're told again that Hagar is an Egyptian. Now again, in the New Covenant, that doesn't mean much to us and it shouldn't.

Egyptians, just like everyone else, are welcome into the kingdom of God. And that's what God promised that Abram would be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

So at least at some level, we should be expecting Abram and his family to be a blessing to this Egyptian woman. But on the other hand, if you think back for a moment to Genesis chapter 10 and the curses Noah put upon his son Ham, it's worth remembering that the Egyptians are descendants of Ham, not a good start.

And if you think forward to the time when Moses is writing, the people of Israel had just spent about 400 years suffering affliction at the hands of the Egyptians. And Abram's actually just been told that that's what's coming in chapter 15.

So I think it all adds up to just make this scene horrifying for the original readers, if I can put it like that. It's kind of like Sarai is offering Abram a Nazi.

- [15 : 42] You know, and the connotations that that would have. I think it just sort of is meant to be in that category and that shocking. And in verse 4, he went into Hagar and she conceived.

Now, if you're following along with the Genesis 3 parallels, of course, the next thing that happens for Adam and Eve after they eat from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is that their eyes are opened and they see that they are naked and they sew fig leaves together for loincloths.

Well, likewise here, someone's eyes are opened but it's not Sarai's or Abram's, notice in verse 4, it's Hagar's. When she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.

And, you know, as I've been pondering this passage, I think what Hagar has done here effectively is to uncover Abram and Sarai's nakedness.

And in Leviticus chapter 18, that's how God describes various inappropriate sexual relationships. For instance, in verse 6, Leviticus 18 verse 6, none of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness.

[16:53] I am the Lord. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother. However, she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness. In other words, when you uncover the nakedness of a husband, you uncover the nakedness of his wife, right?

You have breached, as it were, their intimacy. They exposed themselves to one another, made themselves vulnerable to one another. Now you have violated that and profoundly damaged their safe sexual relationship.

And you see, it's just what happened to Adam and Eve back in Genesis 3. At first, God made them male and female, both naked and unashamed and ready to be fruitful and multiply.

But by rebelling against God, they immediately damaged their relationship with each other. They had reason to be ashamed. They had reason to cover up, just as we all do now, because we're sinful and we live in a sinful, dangerous world now.

And remember when God finally addressed Adam and stepped in to judge him. Adam immediately tries to pass the buck.

[17:58] He blames Eve and then he blames God. The woman you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree and I ate. Well, now Sarai adopts the same defensive strategy.

She blames Abram and Hagar as if she had nothing to do with the whole thing. May the wrong done to me be on you. I gave my servant to your embrace and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt.

May the Lord judge between you and me. Literally in verse 5, she says, My wrong is upon you. Now the translators, I think, have correctly interpreted what she means.

That she has been wronged and it's Abram's fault. But of course, the ambiguity betrays her, doesn't it? The truth is, she has also done wrong and embroiled Abram in her sin as well.

And notice the word for contempt that comes up here. Literally the word has to do with lightness, right? Being light. Sarai has become very small and insignificant in Hagar's eyes as opposed to heavy and substantial.

[19:10] substantial. May the Lord judge between me and you, Sarai says. Well, that's exactly what happened in Genesis 3, but does Sarai really want God to judge her?

After what she's done, the audacity of the comment is remarkable. If God were to judge between Sarai and Abram, I don't think either of them would come off looking good at this stage.

And things are about to get worse. Abram said to Sarai, Behold, your servant is in your power. Do to her as you please. Once again, Abram is just following the customs of the time, the culture.

The code of Hammurabi, which is a Babylonian legal code from around the time of Abram, legislates for precisely this kind of situation and what a mistress is allowed to do to an insolent concubine.

Well, Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar and Hagar ran away. Now, it's hard to know just exactly how harshly Sarai treated Hagar here.

[20 : 12] I'm sort of reluctant to jump to too many conclusions because the word has a fairly broad semantic range. For instance, it's used to describe how the Egyptians treated the Israelites when they were in slavery.

In fact, back in Genesis 15, verse 13, it's the word God used to tell Abram what would happen to his people for 400 years. At the hands of another nation, they would be afflicted, oppressed, they would be put down, they would be treated harshly and crushed by the harsh treatment of the Egyptians.

Or again, in the case of Amnon and Tamar in 2 Samuel 8, when Amnon is about to rape his sister Tamar, she says to him, do not violate me, and that's the word.

Amnon is going to humiliate her in the most violent and cruel way. But this word isn't always about cruelty or excessively wicked behavior.

For instance, it can also be used to describe what God does sometimes in terms of humbling the wicked and the arrogance of mankind. Right, so in Deuteronomy chapter 8, verse 2, Moses describes how God led the people of Israel through the wilderness for 40 years that he might humble you.

[21 : 30] And there's the word again. So look, it's hard to know whether Sarai is just kind of putting Hagar in her place, as it were, bringing her down a peg or two since she has openly disdained her mistress.

Did Hagar need a bit of humbling? Or was Sarai abusing Hagar? Either way, whatever it was, it was enough for Hagar to flee.

And imagine this poor woman. She's young, vulnerable, pregnant, obviously in a very precarious situation. She is living with God's chosen man, Abram, but he has not been a great blessing for her thus far.

Because Abram and Sarai chose fear over faith, gave in to fear, instead of trusting God's promises, they tried to force God's purposes through, through manipulation and compromise and just downright wickedness.

They turned to desperate godless measures to try to accomplish God's purposes. And this is where it got them. Finally, Abram has the child he's always longed for, doesn't he?

[22 : 44] But now the boy is being carried off in the womb of his frightened mother. thankfully, at this point, God graciously intervenes.

The angel of the Lord finds Hagar by a spring of water in the wilderness on the way to Shur. The word for spring, iron, is the same word for eye, which I don't think is profoundly significant, but it will pave the way for a key theme in this encounter.

And Shur is on the way to Egypt. So in other words, Hagar is heading home. In verse 8, the angel of the Lord asks her, Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?

Now we know the answer, don't we? And I'm sure the angel knew the answer too. But I suspect the point is that Hagar might not quite have known the answer herself.

Does Hagar really know that she's left the promised land as she heads back to Egypt, remembering all the connotations that that has. Does Hagar know that she's walked away from the most important man on the planet?

[23 : 56] The man through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed. The man God has committed to, the father of her child. Of course, it's hard to imagine how she could have known something like that.

Abram had hardly been a blessing to her thus far. Nonetheless, that is what she's done. But she said, I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai. The angel of the Lord said to her, return to your mistress and submit to her.

Actually, that word submit there is just another form of the word we saw earlier, the harsh treatment word. But this time, it's obviously kind of coming from the other angle.

Sarai subjugated Hagar, put her in her place. But Hagar is being told to yield to Sarai, to be subject to her, to submit to her, to humble herself, not to fight for equality.

Now, that must have been a very difficult, perhaps even scary, command for Hagar. Because Hagar really has no reason to trust Sarai. I mean, why go back to Abram when she can go home to Egypt to her own people?

[25 : 06] But along with this challenging word of command, the angel brings a comforting word of promise. The angel of the Lord also said to her, I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.

And the angel of the Lord said to her, Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael because the Lord has listened to your affliction. This is a truly remarkable promise, isn't it?

It sounds just like what God has been saying to Abram all along. And there aren't a lot of women in the Bible that get to enjoy this kind of encounter with an angel.

I mean, there aren't a lot of people in the Bible who get to enjoy this kind of an encounter with an angel. But when you think about it, this puts Hagar in a very special list of women. The last person in that list being Mary, the mother of our Lord Jesus.

You shall call his name Emmanuel or he shall be called Emmanuel. And remember, Hagar has not been exemplary here. No matter what's happened to her, she's not an entirely innocent victim.

[26 : 13] Her arrogance and contempt for her mistress is precisely what got her into this mess. But God doesn't just wash his hands of her so quickly.

The name Ishmael means God hears. And the boy is to be called Ishmael because the Lord has listened to your affliction. Again, that word affliction. In the book of Exodus, God is going to use the same language to describe Moses.

How he has heard the affliction of his people. He has heard their cries and he knows their sufferings. So despite Abram and Sarai's mixed up disastrous scheme, God's gracious intervention turns this whole thing around for Hagar.

Bringing blessing for her out of this awful situation. And yet, notice one thing that these promises do alert us to. Hagar is clearly told that her son will not be the promised seed.

Verse 12. He shall be a wild donkey of a man. His hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him. And he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen. In other words, he will not be a source of blessing to the nations, but a source of tension.

[27 : 23] Everyone will be against him and he will be against everyone. He will flourish in a temporary kind of way. God's eternal purposes are not for Ishmael. He won't be the seed God promised Abram in chapter 15.

And Ishmael in a way ends up being a kind of corrupted offshoot of the family line. God will fulfill his promises to Abram in due time, but it won't be and it must not be through any devious schemes that Abram or Sarai can come up with.

Ishmael is the child of human effort and human plans. And Paul picks up on this in the book of Galatians to explain why Ishmael is ultimately a child of the flesh, a child of works-based religion rather than a child of faith.

Ishmael is the natural child whereas Isaac will be the supernatural child. So, Hagar called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, you are a God of seeing.

For she said, truly here I have seen him who looks after me. Hagar is the only person in the Bible who ever gives God a name. Like this. The ESV kind of captures the pun quite well.

[28 : 41] She's saying, I have seen him who sees me. It's a bit of a complicated Hebrew sentence, but she could even be saying it as a kind of a question. Like, have I also here seen the back of the one who sees me?

Or that word after, it could be back or backwards parts, like when Moses sees the backward parts of God. Has Hagar seen that? Have I really seen a glimpse of God?

She thinks to herself. Or have I looked at the one who looks after me? Whatever she's sure, she's obviously been left dumbfounded by it.

She is literally stopped in her tracks. She turns around. She names the place Beelahai Roy, which means the well of the living one who sees me. And she turns around.

We're not told about her journey back to Abram or anything like that, but in verse 15, the narrator cuts to the chase. And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore Ishmael.

[29 : 44] Abram was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. So, time to wrap up. Let me just make a couple of comments about the significance of this passage.

Of course, there are lots of things to reflect on, but let me just mention a couple of things. First, in this chapter, we learn about the character of Abram, that Abram failed.

A lot like Adam failed at the very beginning to trust and obey God. Despite his faith, Abram still fell into sin, and sometimes in spectacular ways.

In this chapter, the gap between Abram's faith and his faithfulness is on stark display. That's why in the New Testament, and I'm thinking of Romans chapter 4, Abram and David are both held up as examples of ungodly men who were justified by faith.

The Lord counts their faith as righteousness and doesn't count their sins against them. The key question I mentioned at the beginning that this chapter brings up is, what will this mean for God's covenant with Abram?

[30 : 54] Has Abram now forfeited the promises? When Abram believed God, God counted it to him as righteousness. Now that Abram has failed to believe God, will his unrighteousness nullify the covenant?

And of course the answer is no. Because in the end, just as we've seen in previous weeks, in the end, God's faithfulness will overcome Abram's faithlessness.

God's unconditional promises to Abram will win the day. So Abram's life was riddled with failure and faithlessness, but because of God's faithfulness, the covenant stood firm.

And so again, the highlight of this passage is not the great man of faith, Abram, but the great God of faithfulness, Yahweh. The story of Hagar tells us about the character of God, that God is not a distant God, or a dead or an inactive God.

He's the living God who sees, and he hears our cries for mercy. He hears our groans in the midst of pain and suffering. The world is not just ticking away like clockwork, just a long chain of cause and effect, as if God set a timer and he'll be back at the judgment day, but until then he's having a snooze.

[32 : 16] God is intimately involved at every level, and so we can trust God and call upon him. You can change the course of history when you pray.

We can call upon God in our darkest moments. That's what God calls Hagar to do in this chapter, to face her fears, to take the harder road, to trust God's plans and purposes for her and for her son.

And actually, it's because of God's steadfast commitment to Abram that that's why Hagar must return to him, because he is still God's chosen man, the man of blessing.

Hagar has to stick with Abram. Why? Because God was determined to stick with Abram. And ultimately, even though Abram failed to be a blessing to Hagar, one day, Abram's greatest offspring would bring blessing to all the families of the earth.

So ultimately, this passage in the whole Bible points us to the faithfulness of God, that God is a solid rock. We can and we should trust him. When you are feeling wibbly wobbly, cling to God, he will hold you up, he will carry the day.

[33 : 33] All of God's promises were fulfilled in Jesus. By his faithfulness, he has overcome all of our unfaithfulness. Let's pray.

Loving God, we know that you hear us when we cry to you, that you are not dead, that you are not distant, that you see us and you care for us.

we pray, Father, that you give us faith, to trust you even in the darkest times. Thank you for your steadfastness, your forgiveness, even when we fail.

We pray that you would hold on to us. Come what may, through our ups and downs, we pray that you would take us home and bring us safely into your presence.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.