

When Faith Fails

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: 16 July 2023

Preacher: Joshua Russell

- [0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, friends. Let's pray for a moment. Loving Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.
- Friends, I wonder if your faith has ever been seriously put to the test. If you think back over your life, have there been times in your life when it's been hard to trust God and to cling to his promises?
- I'm sure there will be some of us here going through testing times at the moment. And what about when your faith has failed? Perhaps times when you thought your marriage was on the line or your job.
- Times of severe illness or financial strain. And, you know, then just to kind of stick the knife in.
- Can you think of a time in your life when your faith was put to the test and found wanting? You know, when you really failed to trust God's promises.
- [1 : 1 9] And even if you can't think of really big spectacular fails, of course, there are all those little ones. Perhaps you found yourself with an exciting evangelistic opportunity.
- But you just couldn't muster up the courage to take it. That's happened to me. Or you found yourself sorely tempted by lust or anger or something like that.
- And you gave in. You know, the Bible says God is faithful. And he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability. But with the temptation, he will also provide the way of escape.
- That you may be able to endure it. That's 1 Corinthians chapter 10. It's a wonderful promise, isn't it? But somehow, so often in the midst of temptation, in the moment, it can just seem so hard to believe, can't it?
- You know, when you can't see a way of escape, you start to doubt that there is one. It feels like God is very distant. We know God's promises, but we don't believe them.
- [2 : 2 3] Or we forget about them entirely. One of my favorite little books that I have at home is by Charles Spurgeon. It's called Faith's Checkbook.
- Has anyone heard of this book? Oh, Jen, good on you. He's just taken 365 promises from Scripture and written a short little reflection on each of them for each day of the year.
- I thought I might read you just a little bit of the preface, though. So Spurgeon writes, A promise from God may very instructively be compared to a check payable to order.
- It is given to the believer with the view of bestowing upon him some good thing. It is not meant that he should read it over comfortably and then have done with it. No.
- He is to treat the promise as a reality, as a man treats a check. He is to take the promise and endorse it with his own name by personally receiving it as true.
- [3 : 2 1] He is by faith to accept it as his own. He sets to his seal that God is true and true as to this particular word of promise. He goes further and believes that he has the blessing in having the sure promise of it.

And therefore he puts his name to it to testify to the receipt of the blessing. This done, he must believingly present the promise to the Lord as a man presents a check at the counter of the bank.

He must plead it by prayer, expecting to have it fulfilled. If he has come to heaven's bank at the right date, he will receive the promised amount at once. If the date should happen to be further on, he must wait patiently till its arrival.

But meanwhile, he may count the promise as money, for the bank is sure to pay when the due time arrives. Some fail to place the endorsement of faith upon the check, so they get nothing.

And others are slack in presenting it, and these also receive nothing. This is not the fault of the promise, but of those who do not act with it in a common sense, business-like manner.

[4 : 29] God has given no pledge which he will not redeem, and encouraged no hope which he will not fulfill. So, it's a bit out of date now, isn't it?

I don't know when the last time was I presented a check, if ever, had to present a check to the bank. But anyway, it's still, I hope, a helpful illustration and a great encouragement.

This is what we are to do with God's promises. We've got to take them to the bank, knowing that they will never bounce. You know, don't just leave them in the shelf or in the cupboard. We've got to take them out and act on them in a business-like manner.

I like that. And I think Spurgeon's comments about waiting for the right date is helpful as well. You know, there are churches, of course, that will promise you blessings now, all the blessings of heaven now, if only you'll have enough faith, health, wealth, and happiness, if only you have enough faith.

But it's not about having enough faith. It's a matter of timing. God promises health, wealth, and happiness in eternity, but not in this life. We've got to go through the cross first before we get to the resurrection.

[5 : 37] And likewise, sometimes I hear people talking about really believing in God for something, but it's something he's never promised. You know, like maybe you didn't get that promotion you wanted and you feel like God let you down.

Or maybe that guy or girl you really liked wasn't actually in the end all that interested in you, and you feel like God has disappointed you again. But actually, God never promised all his people would work in, you know, the job that they wanted or get married.

You know, we can't accuse God of letting us down if we're holding him to promises he's never made, checks, as it were, he's never given us. I was about five or six when I was sitting in church, and the preacher used his son to illustrate faith.

He said, what faith is, is totally depending on someone. So this preacher got his son up on stage to fall backwards into his arms, right, eyes closed, etc.

Have you had to do this at work events or something, building team? Anyway, it doesn't matter. Promptly after the service, I ran up behind my dad over morning tea.

[6 : 49] I turned around. I fell backwards, absolutely confident that he would catch me, which of course he didn't, because he was totally unaware of my plan. It hurt a great deal that he had betrayed my trust.

And you can imagine the trust issues that I've had ever since. Of course, that's ridiculous. Faith is not about really believing something until it becomes true.

That's just believing in believing. That's believing in the power of positive thinking. And that's not going to hold you up. No, true faith is about taking someone at their word.

Trusting God is about listening carefully to his promises, not demanding of him things he has never promised, but taking him at his word. So, it's time to dive into Genesis.

Remember last week, Percy talked us through the beginning of this section about the generations of terror. So as we work our way through the story, we're walking, as it were, alongside Abram, as he seeks to trust God through various trials and tribulations.

[7 : 56] You'll remember the great promises that Abram's faith is based on are there at the beginning of chapter 12, if you just cast your eye back there. There are seven promises. Now the Lord said to Abram, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

And one, I will make of you a great nation. Two, I will bless you. Three, and make your name great. Four, so that you will be a blessing. Five, I will bless those who bless you.

Six, him who dishonors you, I will curse. And seven, in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. So Abram went as the Lord had told him.

And it was a grand and exciting start to the journey last week. Abram arrives in the land in verse 5, sets up camp and starts building altars to worship the Lord.

Despite the local Canaanite presence, God promises Abram that his offspring will inherit the land. Despite the local Canaanite religion, Abram sticks to his guns and calls upon the name of Yahweh.

[9 : 02] In other words, as Abram's journey begins, it's easy to see why people describe him as a hero of the faith. There's a man who trusted God's promises through thick and thin.

And yet this week, our passage is about one of Abram's lowest moments. One of his most dismal failures. And so the main point of this passage, I think, is that God's promises cannot be thwarted by our failures.

God's promises cannot be thwarted by our failures. In fact, God's promises, however impossible they may seem, are ultimately unstoppable. So don't give up on God's promises.

When your circumstances go from bad to worse, when temptation piles on, when your sin seems overwhelming and unshakable, don't give up on God's promises.

Just hold on for dear life to God's promises. Hold on until death. And that's when at last they will all be fulfilled. You will see them with your eyes.

[10 : 07] God has given no pledge that he will not redeem and encouraged no hope which he will not fulfill. So we pick up the story in verse 10.

Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there. For the famine was severe in the land. Now the first thing to do, I think, is just to put yourself in Abram's shoes.

Imagine how disappointing and stressful this must have been. When Abram was in Ur, one of the richest and most prosperous cities in the world, God told him to leave behind his friends and family and his whole life there to go to a new land that God would show him.

Now as soon as Abram arrives there, the land is already occupied. And it's not exactly flowing with milk and honey, is it? And Abram's facing starvation. Won't be the first time I make that mistake.

Literally the word severe there in verse 10 means heavy. Heavy. So you get the idea. And obviously that little comment there, that little explanatory comment is there to help us understand that leaving Canaan was really Abram's last resort.

[11 : 23] You know, you should know, dear reader, Abram went down to Egypt because the famine was so heavy in the land. So severe. I mean, I do think this was a failure on Abram's part immediately to trust God.

God had called him to the land of Canaan and now he's leaving almost as soon as he got there. But we're not being encouraged to kind of judge him too quickly because the famine was very heavy upon the land, like an intense burden for Abram to bear.

A great test. He literally felt forced out of the land lest he and his family should starve to death. And then verse 11, we get another reason why Abram would have been so reluctant to leave the promised land.

It's a case of kind of out of the frying pan and into the fire. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai, his wife, I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance.

And when the Egyptians see you, they will say, this is his wife. Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you and that my life may be spared for your sake.

[12 : 39] So again, I think it's safe to say that Abram didn't want to leave the promised land. He wasn't just heading down to Egypt for a sightseeing tour. But he found himself seemingly with no other options.

He had to go down to Egypt to save his family from starvation in spite of the fact that going there, he thought, might get him killed. And it all has to do with Sarai's extraordinary beauty.

Literally in verse 11, Abram says something like, behold! Exclamation point. I know that you are a woman of beautiful appearance.

He's sort of saying, look at you. Look, you are a beautiful woman. And in verse 14, he's exactly right about how the Egyptians will respond to Sarai.

In verse 14, when Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. You know, this is not beauty in the eye of the beholder type beauty. Right? This is not that Abram was just besotted with his wife.

[13 : 45] The Egyptians saw that the woman was beautiful. And again, in the Hebrew, the word very is put at the end of the sentence for emphasis. You know, the Egyptians saw that the woman was beautiful.

Very! Sarai, even at 65, was turning heads. She was supermodel beautiful. Now, Abram's plan then is that no one must know that they are husband and wife.

Sarai should instead say that she is Abram's sister. Now, this is a very shrewd lie. A very shrewd lie. Just have a think about it. It means that Abram and Sarai can still live together.

And no one would ask questions about that. It also probably means that anyone interested in marrying Sarai would have to go through Abram. And so, in the absence of her father, Abram would be expected to take the role as head of the family.

So, any potential suitors, anyone after Sarai's hand in marriage would have to go through him. Abram will not be seen as a threat if anyone wants to pursue Sarai. And in fact, Abram will probably be plied with gifts and treated well as men try to get close to Sarai and try to make a good impression on her brother and guardian.

[15 : 04] And Abram can just sort of conveniently make sure that none of the suitors is good enough for Sarah. You see, it's a clever lie, isn't it? And it's only a half lie too.

We'll see that later, but Sarai was Abram's half sister. So, it's just a white lie. Surely, it won't hurt anyone. And verse 14, when Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful.

And verse 14, I think, sort of confirms, doesn't it, that Abram was a wise, sensible, prudent, clever man. He was right. He knew the lay of the land.

So far, he got things bang on. But then in verse 15, something comes along that Abram didn't count on. And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh.

Now that, I think, is what Abram didn't count on. See, this is the kind of suitor you can't just fob off, isn't it? We don't know where Abram settled in Egypt.

[16 : 14] It may well be that he lived miles away from Pharaoh's palace. The capital city at the time was probably Thebes, if I've got my dates right, which is way down south. So there's no reason to think that Abram would have traveled all the way down there.

But Pharaoh's princes, that is his royal officials, saw Sarai when she arrived and they spread the word to Pharaoh. They praised her. It's the word Hallel, like Hallelujah.

When we want to praise Yahweh, Hallelujah. But this is Hallelujah Sarai. They praised her. Although you'll notice that Sarai's name kind of completely drops out of the text at this point.

They praised the woman. So in verse 11, the author of Genesis tells us, Abram said to his wife or woman, same word in the original. Abram said to his wife, Sarai, and that's the last time Sarai gets called by her name.

Until verse 17, when the Lord intervenes to save her. But in between that, while Abram is plotting with her, instructing her about what he wants her to say, he never uses her name.

[17 : 25] The Egyptians will say, this is his wife or woman. In verse 14, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. I noticed actually, just in case you've got an NIV in front of you, that they've inserted the name Sarai there in verse 14, just because it sounds so uncomfortable to call her the woman in that verse.

But actually, you see, that obscures the point. Sarai's name isn't there because she's just being treated like chattel. Her identity doesn't matter to Abram at this point.

It doesn't matter to the Egyptians. What matters is that she is a woman and, of course, that she is gorgeous. So, of course, the punchline is there at the end of verse 15.

And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. In other words, she joined Pharaoh's harem and she became one of his wives or concubines.

Now, we don't know how much Abram might have done to stop this or how he felt about the whole situation. We don't know if Sarai was ever forced to sleep with Pharaoh or how close she might have come.

[18 : 36] I don't think she did. But there may have been kind of a long period of preparation and so on if you think about what Esther had to go through in Persia. But either way, the point is, you see, where all Abram's scheming and plotting has got him, his wife has been taken from him by the most powerful man in the world and there's nothing clever Abram can do about it.

In verse 16, and for her sake, Pharaoh dealt well with Abram and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys and camels.

So Abram was right about that too. Sarai's little lie did help Abram's hip pocket. Domesticated camels were almost certainly a very rare and expensive item at the time.

I think electric vehicles, right? Teslas or something like that, the latest and greatest transportation technology with lithium-ion humps. Right?

They were just coming in, camels, just coming in. So Abram has made a lucrative deal, his woman, for sheep, oxen, donkeys and camels.

[19 : 52] not to mention possibly his life. And again, I don't think we have to imagine that Abram was happy with this deal or anything like that.

But in his foolishness that he thought was wisdom, in his faithlessness and his cowardice, this is where his scheming got him. He treated his wife like property and he was given in basically a fair transaction plenty of property in return.

So, in verse 17, it's time for the Lord, Yahweh, to intervene. Verse 17, but the Lord, capital L-O-R-D spells Yahweh, afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.

Now, do you see how verse 17 is just a breath of fresh air, isn't it? First, at last, there's one person who hasn't forgotten Sarai's name, Yahweh.

Moreover, Yahweh hasn't forgotten that Sarai is Abram's wife, not Pharaoh's. And finally, I think there's one other name in this verse that is worth mentioning.

[21 : 13] Oh, that's right, it's Yahweh, himself, the Lord. This is the first time in the whole episode that we've heard about him. Remember when Abram was in Canaan, he kept setting up altars to the Lord, to Yahweh, all over the place, calling upon the name of the Lord.

But when Abram moved to Egypt, he didn't just forget about Sarai, he forgot about the Lord and the Lord's promises to him. I mean, why is Abram so scared of the Egyptians if God promised him that he would become a great nation?

Why is Abram fearful for his life if God's promise to him was that he would have many offspring and he hasn't had any children yet? Why is Abram risking Sarai's life if presumably she is to be the mother of his children?

You see how Abram's faithlessness and consequent dishonesty, and this is always true whenever we think we're being so clever and shrewd, but we act in unbelief.

Abram's faithlessness and consequent dishonesty has only served to mess things up and if it were possible to get in the way of God's promises.

[22 : 30] God had said that he would bless those who bless Abram and bless all the families of the earth through him. Pharaoh presumably thinks that he is blessing Abram.

He just married his sister, just gave him a bunch of camels. He does good by him. He makes him a very wealthy man. But because of Abram's wicked lie, Pharaoh doesn't know that he's actually dishonoring Abram by taking his wife and therefore he brings down God's curse upon him.

It's a tragic mess. So now in verse 18, somehow Pharaoh puts two and two together. We're not told how he worked out the connection between his recent afflictions and Sarai, but somehow he did.

When did we all start getting afflicted? You know? Ah. Or something. We don't know how he worked it out, but when he did, Pharaoh called Abram and said, What is this you have done to me?

Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say she is my sister so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife.

[23 : 48] Take her and go. And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had. Pharaoh then is justifiably furious.

He doesn't point the finger at God but at Abram. What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me she was your wife? Why did you say she is my sister so that I took her for my wife?

Abram doesn't answer any of these questions, of course. He just stands there in stunned silence. Now that the game is up, there really is no justification for what he's done. And again, just kind of a little tip for Bible reading if you're fairly new to it but whenever the characters in the story ask a question you should be asking that question too.

Go looking for the answer see if you can find the answer to that question. So why did Abram do this to Pharaoh? Why did he lie about his wife, etc.? Well, ultimately the answer is the only answer to Pharaoh's questions is because Abram didn't trust God.

Abram was afraid and he gave in to his fears. He forgot Yahweh and those amazing promises he had received. He forgot, as it were, to take those checks to the bank.

[25 : 04] And so he wasn't able to hold up under temptation. Pharaoh's instructions are swift and decisive. Literally in verse 9 he says, and now, behold your wife.

That's the same word used back in verse 11. Same word Abram used back in verse 11. And I think the irony now is obvious that back in verse 11 Abram didn't really behold his wife.

Abram wasn't really looking. He couldn't see beneath Sarai's superficial beauty to how valuable and precious she really was and, even more to the point, the fact that she was his wife or is his wife.

So now Abram has to be told by a pagan king to look at his wife again. And Pharaoh simply says, take and go.

And the wife he had taken, he now returns. Abram is to take her. So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had and lot with him into the Negev.

[26 : 13] And Abraham was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold. And the key word that I think wraps up this episode is there in verse 2.

It's that word rich. Remember the paragraph breaks and the chapters are not original. It's that word rich which again is literally the word heavy.

Okay, so the same word was used to describe the famine back in verse 10. And I think the point is that when Abram left Canaan, he was weighed down by a heavy famine.

But now as he's leaving Egypt, he's weighed down as it were by livestock and gold and silver. He left a heavy man. Which means it's time to wrap up.

Let me leave you with two main takeaways. The first is about the nature of faith and I've just got two sub points here as well. As we look at Abram's faith, what does Abram's story teach us about ourselves and our own faith?

[27 : 16] What it looks like to trust God? I think one of the most obvious things if we put ourselves into Abram's shoes is that we all are confronted with choices between faith and fear all the time.

And this is actually a very common theme that runs throughout the Bible. Think of Joshua and the conquest of the promised land or Ahaz and the threat from Syria and the northern kingdom or Jesus and his disciples in the storm.

Trusting God often takes guts and perseverance. It's not a quick fix or a fast track to success. It means holding your nerve in the face of things that are sometimes really scary like losing your job or watching your loved ones die or ultimately facing death yourself.

sometimes if you're in one of those situations you can see an out if you just fudge the numbers over here or cover something up over there if you play the victim or the bully make threats or show more aggression or try to manipulate someone.

It's easy in those pressure moments to fall back on plotting and scheming and politics. especially if you can kind of hang out in one of those moral grey areas.

[28 : 43] Do you know what I mean? Like Abram telling half-truths about his relationship to Sarai. You know, you don't intend to cross any lines but just go close enough to them that you'll be able to justify it to yourself while also moving up the career ladder or getting that house you've always wanted or whatever it might be.

But friends, that's one of the wonderful things about the life of faith. When you know God is in control and God is good and God's promises for you are unstoppable you don't have to live a life of scheming and plotting and shady dealings.

You can live in a way that is simple and honest and transparent. I mean, there's a time for shrewdness, right? Don't get me wrong. Faith is not about being naive.

Jesus calls us to be shrewd as serpents but also innocent as doves. Shrewdness is not the same as expediency. It's not about delicately balancing along the lines between good and evil, compromising on principles for the greater good or something like that.

No, it's just about acting wisely and reasonably using the means that are at our disposal according to the way God has made the world. But we have to use them always righteously in a way that is absolutely above reproach.

[30 : 16] The second thing I think Abram's story tells us though about the nature of faith is that trusting God sincerely is not the same thing as trusting God perfectly. None of us are heroes when it comes to faith.

In fact, that's a bit of an oxymoron. Not Abram. Abram really deserves that title. But even though Abram was not a perfect believer, he was a genuine believer and in the New Testament he is strongly commended.

Thankfully, in the end, Abram doesn't get defined by his foolish choices and his very worst moments and we don't have to be either. You don't have to be a hero of faith to be a man or woman of genuine faith.

Ultimately, there is only one hero of the faith and that is Jesus. And that really takes us back to the most important point that this passage makes, which I mentioned at the beginning, but it's really the big one.

God's promises cannot be thwarted by our failures. So let's flesh that out a little bit more. You might remember last week Percy showed us some of the connections just looking backwards through Genesis between Abram and Noah and Adam.

[31 : 36] In the same way that God blessed Adam and God blessed Noah, God promised to bless Abram. There's a sense in which Abram was to be a new start for humanity.

A new start where he would be the father of a people of faith, a people who would trust God and multiply and fill the earth and rule it God's way on God's behalf. But this week we see again how Abram failed to be God's new man just like his forebears.

Abram failed to heed God's word. Abram failed the test he was faced with. Abram failed to lovingly lead his wife. And so instead of becoming a blessing to the earth and to all the families of the earth, Abram brings a curse.

But then, despite his foolishness and weakness and wickedness, God rescues Abram out of Egypt. In fact, God does so by sending great plagues upon Pharaoh.

And God works the whole thing so that Abram leaves Egypt enriched by his time there, we might say having plundered the Egyptians. And of course, this foreshadows what God is going to do through Moses in the very next book of the Bible.

[32 : 57] But ultimately, it foreshadows what God did for us through Jesus. You see, we all, like Abram, have gone astray. Each of us have turned to our own way.

Wandering down to Egypt, the land of slavery and darkness. And we've got ourselves lost in dishonesty and fear and scheming and stupidity. But the good news is that God's promises cannot be thwarted by our failures.

Or another way of saying that, when faith fails, God doesn't. When our faith fails, God doesn't. Our salvation rests on God's promises and on God's faithfulness, not on our faithfulness.

When Abram was just about at rock bottom, it's about as big a mess as you could possibly imagine with no way out that he could possibly manufacture, God intervened supernaturally from the heavens.

And so it is with us. In our deepest, darkest hour, just when we needed him, God sent his son into our world, the offspring of Abram, to rescue us.

[34 : 06] For while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die.

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. See, just as Abram's faithlessness did not nullify God's promises or jeopardize God's faithfulness, so our faithlessness doesn't nullify God's promises or jeopardize God's faithfulness.

No. In God's faithfulness, he sent Jesus to be perfectly faithful for us so that through wobbly-wobbly and even half-baked faith in him, we can be saved.

Jesus is the faithful one Adam never could be and Abram never could be, who did not give in to fear in the face of starvation or in the face of execution, but remained faithful, who loved his bride even to death.

And so it is that through Jesus, God secures our salvation in spite of our faithlessness. And that's why ultimately God's people will be weighed down, not by trials and tribulations, famines and threats, but by eternal riches that we don't deserve, that Jesus earned.

[35 : 40] So the story of Abram ultimately teaches us not to put our faith in our faith, our faith in our faithfulness, faithfulness. Because faith ebbs and flows, waxes and wanes sometimes, doesn't it?

And that's okay. Put your faith in God because he is faithful. And his promises and his faithfulness will outlast even our most foolish moments.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Loving Father, have mercy upon us.

We know that we are wandering, prone to wander, that we sin in little ways and big ways, that our faith is feeble and frail.

So often we forget your promises and we give in to temptation. Please forgive us. We thank you for our Lord Jesus who was always faithful that in your faithfulness you sent him to rescue us even in our deepest, darkest moment.

[36 : 54] That at just the right time he died for us and we might be reconciled to you. We pray, Father, you might keep us and grow our faith that we might mature until that day when the Lord Jesus returns and comes to save us and take us home.

I ask it in his name. Amen.