

Faith Facing Life and Death

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[0 : 00] Now, if you would like to turn, please, thank you, to page 1008 in the big Bibles there, and we are going to read a short section, verses 17 to 22.

This great chapter speaks about the faithful God, who in every generation has called people to have faith in him. We begin with the creation of the world itself, looking at some people like Noah in the very early days of human history, and last week looking at the pilgrim par excellence, Abraham himself, and now coming on in this little section to another part of Abraham's story and one or two of his descendants.

So, verse 17. By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.

He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.

By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites, and gave directions concerning his bones.

[1 : 40] Short passage, but a very powerful one. Now, as we are sitting here in church, we are very aware, and perhaps we'll become more aware, if they come this way again, of the songs of the Spaniards as they march through the streets, cheering for their teams.

Some of them, at least, are going to be singing songs of sorrow by this evening. That reminded me of the famous words of the former football manager, Bill Shankly.

Football is not a matter of life and death. It's far more important than that. I'm sure these supporters out there will agree. Now, be that as it may, this little section is talking about the importance of faith in life and in death.

And in particular, in death. Because what our author is saying is, if our faith in the faithful God does not face up to this ultimate challenge, this grim frontier post, which bars every life of everyone who's ever lived, then that faith has no real substance at all.

Faith must be able to confront death itself, if it's going to be genuine faith. Now, the author has been taking the stories from early Genesis, the stories, as I say, of creation, of those who lived before and during the flood, and of Abraham.

[3 : 12] And in this little section, he's really taking the stories from Genesis 22 to Genesis 50. That's the background of the stories, or the background of the verses here.

Carrying on from Abraham to his son Isaac, and then on to the next generation, Jacob and Esau, and finally on to Joseph himself, who bring us, which brings us to the end of the book of Genesis, and next week to the next great figure in this chapter, Moses himself.

And the point is, each of these episodes mentioned here, in each of them, these characters face death, and the question marks it raises.

Because, if, as I say, the gospel, if our faith, can't answer questions relating to death, then it's really nothing to say. Well, a question I want to ask now is this, what was it that allowed these people long ago to face death, sometimes death, in a very distressing form, and what is it that will allow us to face the prospect of death in the same way?

Both our own death, the death of those we love, and the very fact of death itself, which so dominates human life. In the midst of life, we are in death, as the old saying says.

[4 : 31] I want to suggest that these people of long ago did two things which are still valid for us. First of all, they trusted in the promises of God.

That's the first thing. They trusted in the promises of God. And the second thing is that they trusted in the power of God. Now, these two things aren't sharply distinguished, but we'll look at them in turn.

They trusted the promises of God. Now, all of us make promises. All of us receive promises. And very often, these promises are not kept.

Sometimes that's deliberate. You know, people make a promise in order to stop someone nagging. All right, I'll do it. Having no real intention of keeping the promise. But aren't there many times when promises are made and we just can't keep them?

Phrases like circumstances beyond our control intervene. When my son was small, Dad, you promised you would take me to the match this afternoon.

[5 : 40] I'm sorry. I know I promised, but something, some problem has turned up in the church. I would much rather take you to the match, which is true, but I can't do it because I've got to do this.

Or my daughter, Dad, you said, you know, this accusing phrase, you said. I've never been convinced by those who say the best translation of the word Abba is Dad.

Anyone who's brought up a teenage daughter knows the nuances of the word Dad and knows it isn't always a complimentary one. But be that as it may, we make promises. People make promises to us and they can't always be kept.

The point is, though, that there are never circumstances beyond God's control. God never makes, God never has made, God never will make a promise that he can't keep.

The promises of God are certain. And they're all bound up in Jesus Christ. That's what Paul says in 2 Corinthians. All the promises of God find their fulfillment in Jesus.

[6 : 46] And look at verse 17. Abraham is described as he who had received the promises. And what promise had Abraham received? Abraham had received two promises.

First one was he'd be given land. He left his past behind him as we saw last week. Struck out into the unknown. But even when he reached the land, he was still a pilgrim.

He was still a stranger. He still had no permanent settled place to live. He had received the promises. But now something terrible something much worse is happening.

God who had promised him a son and kept him waiting for many, many years before that son came now seemed to be going back on his own promise.

Read the story in Genesis 22. It's a heartbreaking story. Take your son, he says, your only son, Isaac, whom you love. The agony, the knife twists deeper and deeper.

[7 : 46] Your son, your only son, the one that you love. God seemed to be breaking his own promise. See, Abraham is not only being asked, in other words, to give up his past.

Now God seems to be saying, Abraham, I want you to give up your future. And yet, Abraham believed God. He offered up Isaac. He considered, verse 19, and this word consider means he had an inner conviction.

He had this deep inner conviction that God, who had made these promises, had not changed. Since God had made that promise, God would keep it. And even if it seemed absurd, stupid, cruel, terrifying, what God was doing, he would keep it.

So that's the, that's the first thing. They trusted the promises of God. And they trusted the promises of God because they believed that God himself was faithful.

And also, these promises were not dependent on human strength. Look at verse 20. By faith, Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.

[8 : 58] Isaac, if you read his story, is a fairly unimpressive individual after all. After the, after the story, the dramatic story in Genesis 22 of the sacrifice, or rather the sacrifice that didn't happen, and we'll come back to that in a moment, Isaac is a fairly unimpressive figure.

And yet, the promise remains true. By faith, Isaac invoked future blessings. In other words, the promise did not depend on Isaac's goodness, Isaac's impressiveness, and it certainly did not depend on the flawed Jacob and the rebellious Esau.

The one who made the promises, the human who made the promises, was unimpressive. Those who received the promises were very flawed and very imperfect because God is always true to himself.

That's why I've called this series not just faith, but faith in a faithful God. God is faithful. God does exactly what he promises, exactly when he promised it and in face of all the odds.

And the promises also are not dependent on favorable circumstances. Verse 22, By faith, Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exes of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

[10 : 23] Directions he gave were that his bones were to be preserved. And when God eventually took the people back to the promised land, they were to carry these bones with them as a sign that this was the land he was to be in.

Israel is in Egypt, the most powerful nation on earth at that time. But God had promised Abraham, he had promised him back in Genesis 15, that he would bring them back.

And Joseph had heard that promise, presumably down the generations these promises had come. Abraham would tell them to his son, his son would pass them on, and then Jacob himself would pass them on to Joseph.

So, the first thing is they trusted in the promises of God. God is faithful. God has promised that when we come to him in faith, that he will guide us in this life and indeed take us beyond it.

So he sang, and then in the light of his glory and grace we shall adore you and look on your face. A promise that goes beyond death. But secondly, they trusted in the power of God.

[11 : 37] Not in feelings. As I suspect some of our some of our fellows out there are trusting. They trusted in the power of God who made the promise.

Let's put that another way. They believed that God could carry out, could fulfill these promises. An old hymn which used to be sung when I was a boy, Standing on the promises that cannot fail and the howling storms of doubt and fear assail.

Very often the howling storms of doubt and fear will assail each one of us. We won't feel that God is faithful. We won't have any warm, comfortable, cozy feelings that God is good.

In these times we have to trust in the promises and believe in the power. And these people saw beyond death. It's often said wrongly that people in Old Testament times had no belief in life after death.

That is simply not true. They didn't see it fully. Look back at verse 13. These all died in faith not having received the things promised but having seen them and greeted them afar and acknowledged they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

[12 : 48] The people of the Old Testament who believed in the promises of God and in the power of God believed that there was something beyond this transitory world.

And why did they believe this? They believed it because God is the creator. That's why they believed it. They believed even if the earth vanished as Psalm 46 says or the mountains are cast into the midst of the sea.

If God is the creator then God can create a new world can't he? even if the old one is destroyed. They believed that God could overcome death.

The prophet Isaiah talks about God death being swallowed up and God bringing his people into a new world. Now Abraham why did Abraham believe this?

Look back at verse verse 12. 12 Therefore from one man and him as good as dead were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

[13 : 55] Abraham when Isaac was born when both he and Sarah were long long past child were long long past the reasonable age to have children Abraham had already discovered that God could overcome death in his own body and that surely leads him to see that God has power over death itself even when someone is literally dead.

Look back at verse 19. He considered that God was able even to raise Isaac from the dead from which figuratively speaking he did receive him back.

Isaac was as good as dead. The knife was already raised the sacrifice was about to be offered and then God gives Abraham his son back. This word figuratively in a picture used earlier in this letter about the tabernacle which is a picture of heaven itself.

You see what our author is saying back in that early day in human history Isaac was offered up as a sacrifice or about to be and at the last moment God substituted a ram.

God provided a substitute who took on himself what was going to be taken on Isaac pointing to Christ himself and his sacrifice and then pointing beyond that to Christ's resurrection.

[15 : 24] So that old story in Genesis 22 there is already an acted parable an acted parable that one day a victim will die for those who have sinned and will take their sin upon him but that victim will also rise from the dead and so defeat death.

So they trusted Abraham trusted in the power of God even to defeat death itself even at the moment when death was hovering where the angel of death wings already darkening the sky and at that moment God intervenes God who as Paul says in Romans raises the dead and speaks of things that are not as though they were.

They trusted also in the power of God to transmit the message to future generations that seems to me to be one of the points of verse 20 Isaac invoked future blessings now at the time when Isaac spoke these blessings were not at all visible they were going to become visible in the future and that's the way faith is sustained as the message of the promises of God is spread as the word of God is spoken as the power of God influences people's hearts and minds people trust in the promises people trust in the power but they also trusted in the power of God to transform circumstances completely and that seems to me to be the point of verse 22 he made mention of the exodus of the Israelites Jacob Joseph is in Egypt Jacob has died and it seems to me that Joseph probably knew that the prophecy had been given to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land but that for several hundred years there would be exiles and slaves in a land that did not belong to them in other words he foresaw the period of exile but he looks beyond that to the time of exodus when God would redeem his people read Genesis read the book as a whole and see the terrible contrast between the first verse and the last verse of Genesis in the beginning

God created the heavens and the earth new hope new life and the promise that one day there will be a new heaven and a new earth because God finishes what he does how does the book end the last verse says this Joseph died and was placed in a coffin in Egypt a terrible descent from God created the heaven and earth to in a coffin in Egypt what did these people in the grey dawn of human history believe in they believed in a God who created the world they believed in a God who knew his way out of the grave a God who raised the dead so as we finished today that is the message for us today that's not just the message for the old world that's not just the message for the patriarch that's the message for us if we want to live the life of faith in a faithful God we need to trust the promises of God and one way we trust the promises is by feeding them by making scripture part of our daily lives by allowing

God's promises to speak to us in scripture and secondly we trust the power of God the God who not only promises but can fulfil these promises and will fulfil these promises and that is a message with which to go into the rest of today and indeed into the rest of our lives let's pray Lord God faithful and unchanging and yet continually meeting us in the ever changing and developing circumstances of our lives how we praise you that you have given to us great and precious promises and you have embodied these promises in Jesus Christ your son our Lord the word has become flesh in him and in him we find we find the one to whom the ram sacrificed instead of Isaac speaks the one who rose from the dead and opened the kingdom of heaven to all who believe bless us now Lord as we go back to our work as we go back to our other activities and may we indeed in the busyness and in the perplexity of this world walk by faith and trust in you trusting your promises and trusting your power we ask this in Jesus name

[20 : 17] Amen Turn down back to your simples and holding Kin supreme to your life and rasp ofsee to your lost peace andøre forward by