

Genesis 27-32

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[0 : 00] There should be a greater reality of those promises that he has made to me being worked out in my everyday life. But the reality is that there often is a gap between our experience and our expectation.

So where can we go to find help when we experience such a crisis of faith? It may be that you're going through such a crisis even this evening. I only know a few of you and I don't know you that well.

So I don't know your own experiences and situations. But also it's good perhaps if we're not going through such a problem at the moment to think on these things.

Because we all face such difficulties and trials and troubles from time to time. How do we find help to strengthen our faith when we're caught in this what I'm calling a reality gap?

Stuck as it is, as one of the commentators put it, in the time warp between the road to Jerusalem and the road to Emmaus. Let me explain what I mean by that. You remember after the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[1 : 12] There on that third day, that first Easter Sunday, the Lord Jesus Christ had risen from the dead. Some of the disciples had already seen him. And there were these two men and they were on the road to Emmaus.

And they were disillusioned. They were disappointed, disheartened. They had not expected the one they thought was the Messiah to be put to death.

Let alone buried. And the great rock rolled over the entrance to the grave. And as they go on their way, these two men, they're discussing all these points.

And suddenly, someone else appears with them. They don't recognize him at first. And we read in Luke chapter 24 and verses 25 to 27 that this man says to them, How foolish you are, how slow of heart to believe all the prophets have spoken.

Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself.

[2 : 22] What Jesus did, of course, it was the Lord Jesus who was with them, the risen Christ at that time. He showed them that they needed to understand that this pattern of suffering preceding glory is something which goes right the way through scripture.

It's interwoven with scripture. The death of Christ had to come before the resurrection. If Christ was going to achieve the salvation for his people that his father had promised, then a sacrifice was required.

And that sacrifice could only be the Son of God himself. And therefore, Christ had to suffer there on the cross. And in suffering on the cross, there came glory when he rose from the dead.

The death of Christ came before the resurrection. And if the Emmaus Road disciples had understood this, then the events of Calvary would not have been such a shock to them.

They would have been better equipped to face the tough realities of life with an unshakable faith in God. If they really understood that Christ had to die.

[3 : 42] It would then have seen that his resurrection was a glorious reality. Now what I want to do this evening, and God willing, over the next two weeks, I want to, by looking at some of the aspects of the life of Abraham, to see what it means to be living in the gap, as it were, between promise and reality.

Firstly then, preparing for what lies ahead. Preparing for what lies ahead. We've had quite a year, haven't we, with the Olympics this last year.

Incredible to see all the Olympians and the Paralympians, all that they have done, all their achievements, their medals, how hard they had worked.

Even Andy Murray nearly won Wimbledon. Maybe this year he'll do it. And who knows, but all the training, the years of training, and hard work and practice, had brought results to those who achieved at the Olympic Games.

Such training, of course, and practice is necessary to achieve the goal. There's no way you could walk out onto a tennis court, or onto an athletics track, and expect to achieve a good result, without having put in years of hard work and training.

[5 : 13] Maybe it's a bit like the concert violinist. I was seeing an interview of a concert violinist the other evening, and she reckons she had to practice for about five to six hours every day to achieve.

Others are out enjoying themselves. Others are out in recreation and all the rest. But they're needed to practice, and without doing so you can never expect to reach the highest level.

It may be years of hard work, sometimes tedious preparation, until those have sufficiently matured so that they achieve the results. But the same principle applies in the service of God.

God prepares his people for the task to which he has appointed them. God is sovereign over all things, so he takes his people, and he has tasks that he has for them, and he prepares them for the work they are to do.

Just think of some of the examples in Scripture. Think of Moses. Forty years in the desert. What was he doing there? Herding sheep.

[6 : 33] Do you herd sheep? Leading sheep. Whatever they do. Yes, it is. Thank you, Graham. Herding the sheep. Before God called him to lead his people out of Egypt.

What better preparation, impatience, could there have been before he was called to lead that stubborn flock of God's people through the wilderness for 40 years?

What about David? King David. Think of his experience as a shepherd. There he was out in the fields. The family were all back home. He had to spend all his time out looking after the sheep.

He learnt to take on wild animals. We read with his own bare hands, he killed the lion and the bear so that he might protect the flock. And all of that, of course, prepared him to take on the wildest animal of all, Goliath.

And to do so in defence of the flock of God. God knows how to prepare his people for the tasks he has for them. Now, the same principle is applying here in the life of Abraham.

[7 : 43] And we often begin, when we think about the life of Abraham, we often begin at chapter 12, and the call of Abraham to leave the country to go to Canaan. But in fact, it actually starts a few verses before at the end of chapter 11, which we read from this evening.

We're introduced to terror, and it's a major turning point in the history of humanity. Just think for a moment.

Adam stands out as the original head of the human race. He is the one whose breath was given to him directly by God. He is the original head of humanity.

After a while, we find that humanity has fallen into all kinds of sin and degradation. And the great flood comes, but there's a new beginning.

Noah is the head of a new beginning after the flood. But now here, in chapters 11 and 12 of Genesis, we start to see now that God is acting to fulfill his promises through terror's family.

[8 : 58] From now on, from this point, right the way through to the Christ himself, we find that the Old Testament history concentrates on one family.

That will go up to a nation, of course, of Israel. But there is a line that goes through it. And how this one family interacts with other nations.

Verse 27. This is the account of terror. And we're told terror became the father of Abraham, Nahor, and Haran. Tells us of the genealogy of terror.

I suppose we'd want to say it's the genealogy of Abraham. But terror is vitally important. It is the father who's given the prominence here. And the reason is that the closing verses of chapter 11 give us vital information about the background to the calling and the subsequent career of Abraham.

God's dealings with Abraham did not start with him as a 75-year-old man. Just about to set out on a journey to Canaan.

[10 : 04] It wasn't that God looked around, as it were, if I can say this reverently, to try and find someone suitable, of a suitable character, to act or to become the father of his people.

Far from it. God had chosen. God was preparing. God was preparing Abraham, or Abraham, as he became known, for quite some time, even though Abraham was quite unaware of it.

This is 31 and 32. Terah took his son Abraham, his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter in North Sarai, the wife of his son Abraham.

And together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran. They were going to Canaan.

They didn't make it. They got halfway there. They stopped in Haran, and there Terah died. It was Terah who had actually set out for Canaan, taking his family with him.

[11 : 07] Now we are not told why, or what prompted him to move from where he was to go towards Canaan. Had God spoken to him? Was it just a thought that came into his mind?

It wasn't unusual for such movements in those days? Whatever happened, they never made it. They never made it to Canaan. They stopped here in Haran.

But the thought of going to Canaan was still in Abraham's mind. And when in due course the call of God came to him to go, Abraham was ready to obey.

God had fitted to hear the call, fitted him to hear the call and answer it. Abraham was ready. So when God comes to him, as we read in verse 1 of chapter 12, leave your country, your people, and your father's household, and go to the land, I will show you.

That's coupled then with these glorious promises. Abraham was ready. God had worked on him so that he received the message of God. Terah himself, of course, was not picked at random.

[12 : 18] If we follow the genealogy backwards, we find he comes from the line of Shem, the son of Noah. He was a descendant of the very line which God had been working with for many generations.

God's plan was to preserve a godly line. These things were not just haphazard or by chance. It was by the determined, set purpose of God.

There was a promise of a redemptive offspring that would come, a seed. Back in Genesis chapter 3 and verse 15, we're given the first promise of this.

We read, Genesis 3, 15, and I put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head and you will strike his heel.

We don't have time to unpack all that this evening. But it is that God had a set plan and purpose and it was being prepared. The descendant of Eve would ultimately triumph over Satan, over evil.

[13 : 27] But the line had been challenged. It had barely got started then the challenge came. Cain killed his brother Abel. But we read that God gave Eve another seed, a son set, to carry the line.

When utter corruption overwhelmed the peoples of the earth, God kept Noah safe through the flood so that the line of promise could continue.

Then here with Abraham comes the next great phase in the history of redemption. In many ways, Abraham was not aware of the way in which God had prepared him.

But now everything was ready for the purposes of God. But there's something else we need to note here. It wasn't just Abraham or Abraham who was being prepared, so was his wife, Sarah.

She had been, as one of the commentators said, wrote, had been in the school of hard knocks. We read in verse 30 of chapter 11, Now Sarai was barren. She had no children.

[14 : 37] It's always important to look at the emphasis you find in Scripture. See, there's a repeat there. Now Sarai was barren. And as if to sort of ram home the thought of the importance of this, the Scripture says she had no children.

There's something important about that. In a society where a woman's value was measured in her ability to have children, it must have been a bitter blow for Sarah. How many tears must she have shed over the fact that she had been unable to conceive?

But this too, you see, was a crucial part of God's preparation of her for his part in his plan. For Sarah to be the mother of the child of promise, which Isaac would be, it was essential that she could not bear a child without the direct intervention of God.

So God was preparing both Abram and Sarai for the plans he had for them. And we could take another month going through all of the plans right the way through, but let me jump over to the New Testament and turn to Ephesians chapter 2 and in verse 10 and we read this.

For we, that's you and I if we're in Christ this evening, for we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.

[16 : 12] So one time, we've seen Abraham and Sarah and the way that God has prepared them for all the blessings that were to come for the final coming of Isaac and we know the story I'm sure and all the rest.

But Paul reminds us that such things are not limited to the big names of scripture. It is something which is applied to all of us at every level.

We are God's workmanship. If you're a Christian this evening, are you trusting in Christ? Have you truly repented of your sin? Have you seen just how far you've fallen short of a holy God and of the standard that God requires?

Are you anticipating to get to heaven by your own good works? You'll never do it. But God calls us to repent and calls us to trust in faith in Christ for the work that he did there on the cross.

And if we have done that, we are God's workmanship. It is God working in our hearts and we have been created in Christ Jesus not to sit around and do nothing, not to relax.

[17 : 23] It doesn't matter our age. Can I suggest there's no such thing as a retirement for Christians? Might be redeployed and other activities. You can't do quite what you used to but you're not redundant because God has created good works and prepared us in advance for those works to be done.

So that raises a question, doesn't it? For what good works is God preparing you? What would be your answer to that right now?

I think most of us would say the same, wouldn't we? I haven't a clue. I don't know. Is God preparing me? What is it that God wants me to do? God's purposes are certainly not always transparent at the time.

think of Moses there in the desert. Forty years stuck with those sheep bleating around him looking after them caring for them. He must have felt completely and permanently sidelined.

Yet God was using that very experience to prepare him for the work to do. And David did David have any idea of future greatness that he would become king?

[18 : 43] that he would defeat Goliath and all the rest? As he chased off yet another lion or another bear in trying to protect the flock?

Abraham could have little thought what God had in store for him in bringing him from Ur through to Haram. Sarah's tears were not helped by an explanation of what was going to happen.

we might say well if we only knew I mean if Sarah knew what was to happen she wouldn't have grieved over the fact she had no children or she was barren. If God had told her at that point well don't worry but God doesn't work that way.

He calls us to trust him and to rely upon him. It will be later for Abraham and Sarah with the benefits of hindsight that they will be able to look back and see that God had done all things well in their lives.

But in the meantime all they could do was to cling to God believing but not understanding.

[19 : 59] And that's really the heart of what I want to say this evening. we're called to believe even though we don't understand. Now I'm not talking about those who talk about a blind faith a leap in the dark.

What I'm talking about here are the experiences we're going through at this time. The situation we find ourselves in which may be difficult may be hard may be saddening to us.

But we need to believe even if we do not understand the direction we're going in. This should bring a vital perspective to our lives and experience.

The situation we find ourselves in may well be a key part of God's preparation for what he wants from us at some point in the future.

But it will only be perhaps as we look back to understand how it all works into God's plan in our lives. I recently preached through the book of Job quite astonishing book of all the things that happened to Job and we have such information in the scriptures as to why all these tragedies came on Job why he lost his family his possessions his wealth his health in a matter of one or two days.

[21 : 25] why he had these comforters who did the very reverse of comforting him over a period with all their ideas about why he was suffering.

And it's only when we get to the end of the book that God says to him well where were you when I made the earth? Where were you when I planned all these things?

Can you do anything? Can you make the dawn come? Can you change the course of the river? And all of these things and Job is reminded that all these things are in the hands of God.

And whilst Job cannot understand whilst Job even is not given a full insight as to all that has happened he comes to that point where he acknowledges that God is the great God of heaven and he is the one in whom he trusts.

So we are called to cling to God believing though not understanding. Secondly waiting for the promise.

[22 : 34] Waiting for the promise. The experience we find ourselves in may very well turn out to be God's preparation for the good works he's planned for us to do.

And that ought to be a great encouragement to us. It ought to be a real spur to our accepting the situation whether it be good or ill that we face in a particular time.

We need a caution here of course. We are not to take all our circumstances as authoritative guidance. We can be wrong.

The only authority we have of true guidance is the scripture alone for it's only the word of God that is infallible. That is the infallible rule in all our lives.

No matter how clear the Lord's leading sometimes may seem to us. We sometimes think that if a door is open a way looks as though we can go forward well that must be the right way to go.

[23 : 35] It doesn't always mean the case. I sometimes think that a closed door is better because that means I can't go that way and can't make that mistake.

An open door means I've got to think a lot more as to whether this is within the will of the Lord. We're called to subject our understanding of all that comes to us to the scriptures.

As well as to the wisdom and discernment of fellow Christians we don't ignore those but it's the word of God that has the preeminence. Our circumstances are those which work together for our good.

God promises that doesn't it? For those who believe those who are called to the purposes of God all things work together for those who love God. Our circumstances do that so we praise God that he prepares his people through many different circumstances before he calls them to any task.

The person who had some acute cancer the Christian is often able then to give some comfort and help and encouragement to others who are facing a similar situation.

[24 : 54] Someone who's lost a loved one husband or wife or child as grievous as it is they can be used mightily by God in giving encouragement to others who are facing such a situation.

God is a God of love and prepares his people and often the work he calls us to is the work of help support and encouragement of one another.

God is there's also a warning here if I may say that these things in terms of God preparing us is not restricted to the young people of the congregation just in case any of you who are getting a bit thin or a bit gray on top think well this is not part for me because I'm well on in my Christian life.

just remember how old was Moses when he finished that preparation stage. He didn't start to lead the people of Israel until he was 80 years of age.

Abraham is 75 here. Just remember there's no limits to think of someone like Joseph of Arimathea we don't know how old he was but God had obviously prepared him so that at the moment of Christ's death he had that grave already so that it could be used.

[26 : 21] And that was in a fulfilment of scripture and I don't suppose for one moment Joseph of Arimathea had even thought about that but God was preparing him. There's a warning here as well even lengthy preparation does not guarantee an immediate result.

God prepared Abraham and Sarai and in due time there would be the start of a great nation through which blessing would come to all nations.

Yet for a long time all that distinguished Abraham and Sarah from their neighbours was the promise of God.

See what I mean? They had no halo of glory around them that you so often see in some of the middle-aged paintings.

you know where every religious person has this sort of halo over the top of them. I can't see any halos here this evening over the top.

[27 : 25] We don't have that. God doesn't give that to us. He doesn't mark us out physically as being the people of God. As far as Abraham and Sarah was concerned, their camels were like any other camels.

Most probably a bit awkward and a bit bad-tempered. They spit, don't they, camels and all the rest. The troubles there, camels were no better. There was no pillar of cloud or fire to lead them as they travelled from Haran to Canaan as Israel had on its journey out of Egypt.

If you had seen Abraham and Sarah and Lot and that small group at that particular time, you would not have been able to distinguish them from any other group of travellers.

But there was one difference which they knew, which others could not see, and it was this, the promise of God marked them out. And isn't that the same today?

And this is where we take our encouragement. What marks us out from our non-Christian neighbours? What marks us out from the world in which we live?

[28 : 38] What marks us out from those around us? us? We're not necessarily smarter than they are, not actually richer, not better off, not better looking, not healthier and all the rest.

You experience many of the same kinds of problems and crises that they do. What marks you out as different? Well, it's this.

it is the promises of God that you know are yours that marks you out from the others. That's why you want to live a holy life. That's why you want to live a life that's obedient to God.

Oh, it'll make your life stand out from the world in which you live. But the thing that marks you out is that you have the promise of God.

God, if you're a Christian, you know that God is working in you to achieve his purposes. Let me quote more accurately that text I mentioned a moment ago.

[29 : 41] 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. It is precisely that promise that enables you to experience what we said at the beginning, the reality gap.

You know, for the non-Christian, the unbeliever, there is no such reality gap. Their lives may or may not be going well. I don't know if you're all a Christian here this evening.

If you're not a Christian, it may be that you don't think very much concerning your life at the moment. Things may be going well, they may not be going well, but either way, it has no real meaning, it has no direction, it has no real purpose.

For those who do not believe, they think of themselves no more than simply a chance collection of atoms, and there's no reason why their life should go well.

Richard Dawkins and all his writings and all his ideas believers, has no answer to this question. He has no answer to the question of the meaning of life.

[31 : 04] Why should my suffering have any significance? If you're not a Christian, you won't even be thinking about that. You're thinking of it as bad luck, just a roll of the dice.

I happen to be the one who's got the cancer or whatever disease it is. There's no promise, you see, that the non-Christian can claim.

They are left hoping against hope that everything will turn out right in the end. So many have a fanciful idea that whatever happens, provided you haven't done something extreme like murder or child abuse, you're going to make heaven.

Well, my friend, that's not what the Scriptures tell us. the Scriptures tell us that only those in Christ will achieve eternity in heaven. You see, the Christian is different.

The Christian is different. They know God is in control of all things. And that even if all appearances are to the contrary, God has a plan in which all things in heaven and on earth will work out for his glory and our good.

[32 : 15] Think again of Job. His circumstances looked horrific. They seem to be working in the dead opposite direction to what might bring glory to God, but that was not the case.

It's precisely our faith that creates this reality gap. When we don't understand how these particular trials, how these particular circumstances will work out?

Let's draw to a conclusion this evening. My third and final point is this holding to the promises. Holding to the promises. How do we stay strong in the midst of this reality gap?

What can we do when we find ourselves drowning in painful circumstances or broken relationships or disheartened feelings or disappointments?

the answer is simple. Well, at least in theory it's simple. You cling to the promises of God and you cling to the God of those promises.

[33 : 22] promises. In my little experience, those who've suffered great trials as Christians know the promises of God and they know the God of the promises and whilst they don't delight or enjoy the experiences they may have gone through, they do know that they have a God who cares.

You don't always have to understand. You don't always have to know all the answers. You know what little children are like. Whatever you say, they keep saying why, why, why.

God doesn't always give the answers but he does give the strength. He does give the promise. This was a lesson that Abraham had to learn and like us it was a lesson that he had to learn repeatedly.

It took him quite a while to catch on what was happening and we have the whole history of God's faithful dealings with his people to take instruction from. But there is more that we have.

God's promises to us, all the things he has promised for his people have been signed and sealed in the broken body and the shed blood of Christ.

[34 : 44] Christ. We're going to come and sit around the Lord's table in a few moments. As the bread is broken and as the wine is distributed, we will be remembering what Christ has done.

And what Christ has done has secured all the promises of God for his people. Abraham had to leave his home on the bare word of God alone.

But we have this assurance as Paul writes to us in Romans chapter 8. We read, he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things?

That's not an idle promise. It's a promise of a God who loves his people and cares for them. It is as we remember that Christ died for us.

As we reflect that there is no forgiveness anywhere else except in Christ. It is he alone who has made us right with God, brought us into union with the great God of heaven.

[35 : 54] Nor do we need any other resource other than the Lord and Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. As we remember that this Jesus Christ is coming back.

And he's coming back to bring all his people to their heavenly home. What do we read in John, is it John 14 where we read that he has gone on ahead to prepare a place for every one of his people.

There we will be in his presence. There the gap between promise and reality will be finally closed once and for all. And the reality we are experiencing in the presence of our Saviour in all eternity will be the glorious reality of the promises of God come to fulfilment.

There we will worship him for his incredible grace, his inexplicable love towards sinners like you and I. Those whom he has slowly, patiently, thoroughly turned and prepared to be the saints of God who can stand forever in his presence.

So tomorrow morning when the trials and troubles start, back to school, back to the workbench after the holiday and all the rest and all the difficulties, remember that God is working out his purposes in your life and in my life day by day to achieve his purposes for his glory and our good through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

[37 : 38] Amen.