

# Faith struggling but saving

*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: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev R.G.Mackay

[ 0 : 00 ] Returning this evening to Genesis chapter 15. I would like us to read from verse 2. We'll read from the beginning of the chapter, in fact.

Genesis chapter 15. After these things, the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram, I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward.

And Abram said, Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eleazar of Damascus?

And Abram said, Behold, to me thou was given no seed, and lo, one born in my house is mine heir.

And behold, the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, This shall not be thy name.

But he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thy name. And he brought him forth abroad and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars that thou be able to number them.

[ 1 : 09 ] And he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And Abram believed in the Lord, and he counted it to him for righteousness.

I think as we go through the story of Abram, it's good for us to remind ourselves of the relevance of this story to our lives today. It's a story of one man's relationship with God.

It happened a long time ago. But it's still relevant today. It's relevant because God doesn't change.

God himself tells us that he is from everlasting to everlasting God. God, the God of Abraham, is the God whom we worship this evening.

He doesn't change. And then when we think about Abraham, he is very different from us in many, many ways.

[ 2 : 18 ] But Abraham's central need is the same as our central need. It's our need of sinners that we share with Abraham.

And the way that God deals with that need. The way that God deals with sinners.

In enabling them to overcome that problem so that they might walk with the living God. God is still on the basis of faith.

And so that's why Paul in Romans chapter 4 that we read earlier can use Abram as an example of what it's like to be a believing servant of God.

It's the same as it was in Abram. Because that's the basis on which God accepts sinners and blesses them.

[ 3 : 32 ] In every generation it's on the basis of faith. And that's what the story of Abram is about. It's about God dealing with a man on the basis of faith.

So that that man is blessed by God with all God's saving blessings. And the principles do not change.

Just as Abraham was right with God because of his faith, and that's what verse 6 of tonight's passage says, that's the way it always is.

It's only on the basis of faith that anyone in any generation can be right before God and know God's saving blessings.

And so one of the most important questions in all the world that we can ask this evening is this.

[ 4 : 46 ] Do we have the faith of Abraham? Do we have the same sort of faith that Abraham had? Because that's the faith that assures of God's blessings in our lives.

And in the verses in front of us this evening, that faith is very much highlighted. And if we have time, I would like us to see two things about that faith this evening.

First of all, it was a struggling faith. Maybe that surprises you.

But I think that's what we see in the passage before us this evening. Before we come to something perhaps much firmer than that, we first of all see a struggling faith.

And that may bring comfort and encouragement to many people here this evening. Because it's telling us that if the faith of Abraham was real faith, the faith that makes a man right with God, and yet it can sometimes be a struggling faith, then it's telling us that a struggling faith can be real faith. [ 6 : 09 ] can be the faith that brings God's saving blessing into our lives. You see, although I want us to concentrate on verses 2 to 6 this evening, we of course have to relate it to verse 1, out of which it flows.

God came to Abraham at verse 1, and he said to Abraham, Fear not, Abraham. I am your shield and your exceeding great reward.

God revealed himself to Abraham as Abraham's God, who was committed to keeping Abraham, to saving Abraham.

I'll be your shield to protect you from all danger, physical or spiritual. And I will be your reward, or it may be translated, your reward that I will give you will be very great.

Because of me, Abraham, because of my commitment to you, you're going to continue along that saving way to all the blessings that I have in store for you, no matter the difficulties that you may have to face.

[ 7 : 30 ] And you see, God comes with these unchanging abilities that God has. And he can come to us this evening with these same abilities, because God doesn't change.

And he can say to everyone here this evening who is one of his own people, who is trusting in him, Fear not. I'm your shield, and your reward will be very great.

And all your need as a sinner, and your particular need in that you may be filled with all sorts of fears, I can meet that need. But Abraham still has a difficulty.

God comes with all that promise, with all that assurance, that Abraham has a difficulty. Abraham has a specific fear, and he expresses this specific fear to the Lord.

Because he can't quite work out how it fits in. The circumstances are saying one thing, and it doesn't quite seem to fit in with what God has just promised. And Abraham said at verse 2, Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless?

[ 8 : 53 ] And the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus. And Abraham said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed. And lo, one born in my house is mine heir. One of my chief servants.

That was often the practice of the age in which Abraham lived. If there was no physical heir, then some legal heir.

Very often a servant in the house was given the privilege of being the legal heir. And Abraham is saying, Yes, you've promised to protect me, and you've given me great promise, but you made a specific promise to me about a seed.

And time is going on. And I'm getting older. And there's no sign of the fulfilment of that specific promise.

And I've got difficulties with it. And there was a struggle going on in Abraham's soul.

[ 9 : 56 ] And it's the age-old struggle that the people of God know in every age. It's the struggle between faith and unbelief.

Abraham's complaint, I don't want to make that word too strong, but Abraham's doubt that he expressed to the Lord, really came out of true faith.

He was holding on to God's promise at verse 1, that there was nothing he needed fear. But he's saying to the Lord, You're telling me that I don't need to fear anything, but I'm afraid I have to confess that I do have this nagging fear about this specific promise and the fact that it has never been realised.

And the struggle was going on there. But the very struggle was an evidence that faith was there. That faith was being assaulted with the unbelief that creeps in oh so easily to the imperfect heart. Perhaps Abraham's unbelief was being fed in the way that the evil one so often tries to feed unbelief by conformity to the customs of the day.

[ 11 : 31 ] That's what Abraham was expressing, really, when he said this Eliezer of Damascus, He'll have to be my heir. That's the custom of the day. There's people who lose faith that they'll ever have a child of their own, and so they have to appoint a legal heir, and it looks as if I'll just have to go down the same road.

I thought that you had greater for me, but that doesn't seem to be your purpose, and we'll just have to fit in with the customs of the day. And aren't these similar to the sort of struggles that the Christian has in these days also?

Oh, we see the great ideals that God sets before us in his word, the life of faith, how it is to be so different, so separate, so Christ-like, that it becomes difficult.

And the more we seek to follow the way of Christ, carefully trusting in him for all grace, to live a life that is a life of separation from sin, a life in the world, but not of the world, a life of becoming more and more like Jesus.

And the more we commit ourselves to that life, the more difficult it becomes. And then belief struggles with faith and tells us, perhaps you've just been a little bit too idealistic.

[ 13 : 07 ] Although God has set it down in his word in these stark terms about being separate from sin, it can't be quite like that in this world.

And you've got to appreciate that you mustn't put the world off in any way. And a little conformity here, a little conformity there, it will make things easier.

It will make you more attractive to the world. It will make me more attractive to the world. Maybe they'll listen more to what I have to say. And I can still live the life of faith quietly.

And belief working on the mind. But the Bible says to the believer, be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Abram has something to teach us here.

[ 14 : 25 ] There may have been some inner struggle, but he doesn't keep it inside depending on his own argumentation.

Because our minds, you see, we have so much of the world still in them. And the more we argue with ourselves, the more we are likely to become conformed to the world at the end of the day.

Unless we bring our arguments and our difficulties and our questions before the Lord and lay them before him in the sort of way that King Hezekiah laid the letter that he received before the Lord.

Oh, there's danger in bottling up the inner struggles and tensions that we have because of faith.

And we need to learn from Abram here.

Here was the beginnings of him being brought further on in the way of faith because whatever inner struggles he had, he expressed them to the Lord. Yes, Lord, I thank you for these amazing promises that you give me, but I still can't see how it's going to work out in this specific situation.

[ 15 : 39 ] And the seed that you said I would receive, I haven't received. What am I going to do about it? How is it going to work out? I see things this way and then I see things that way and we need to use prayer in this way to spread our difficulties and our doubts before the Lord and to confess to him that our faith is struggling at times, that we come to him with the struggle.

And that's the evidence that the faith is real, struggling though it may be. How has it been with yourself in these days?

How has it been with myself? Whatever difficulties we have come up against in our Christian life, how have we been dealing with these difficulties, these problems, church problems, personal problems, family problems?

Have we kept it in here and argued it out this way and that way that depending on our own common sense or on our own wisdom exclusively?

How much time have we spent over these problems speaking to ourselves or speaking in our family circle perhaps or in some church fellowship circle?

[ 17 : 35 ] And that's all very good up to a point. that how much time have we spent in that sort of discussion compared to the time we have spent in discussion with the Lord over the matter in prayer?

Abraham took his struggling faith to the Lord and that made all the difference.

That meant that his faith struggled, yes, that struggled upward and forward and not downward or backward.

the Lord answered him. The Lord gave him a clearer revelation that he had ever given him before concerning his seed.

We have it at the end of verse 4 that he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine ear. Yes, Abraham, let me be quite clear about it.

[ 18 : 50 ] I'm talking about you having a physical ear not just a legal ear. And then it was a faith, yes, though struggling, but as Abraham brought it to the Lord, the Lord strengthened him.

And the Lord strengthened Abraham in the way that he always strengthens faith by giving new revelations of the God in whom the faith is placed.

He took him outside. It seems to have been evening time now that Abraham is before God in prayer. And he took Abraham outside. He brought him forth abroad and said, look now toward heaven and tell the stars if thou be able to number them.  
and he said unto him, so shall thy seed be. Look to the stars Abraham. Am I the God of these stars?

Have I made these stars? Am I the God who by my creative power flung them into the Milky Way and set their course for the rest of time?

[ 20 : 15 ] That's the sort of power that belongs to the God who is promising to give you a seed in your old age.

Now will you trust me more firmly God still didn't say anything to Abraham about the timing of the fulfillment of the promise.

And that was one of Abraham's main difficulties because he was getting older and Sarah was getting older. Indeed, the next time he comes to God with a doubt, it's not so much over his own physical old age because he's now heard that he's to be the physical heir, but he's going to come to him with doubts about Sarah's old age.

The timing was important to Abraham. He's seen time going by. How can it possibly be done? And at this stage, God still doesn't tell him anything specific about the timing.

Because there need to be some difficulties in the environment of faith. That's the way that faith grows. That's the way that we're strengthened to turn away from all trust in ourselves, which is the great enemy of faith.

[ 21 : 35 ] To trust only in God and his promises and his perfect and holy power to fulfill all his promises in his perfect way.

Wait on the Lord. Psalm 27 says, be of good courage and he shall strengthen thine heart.

Wait, I say, on the Lord. True faith can be a struggling faith.

But the other thing that we see here about Abraham's faith is that it was a saving faith. faith. It was a struggling faith, but it was a saving faith.

That's what we have at verse 6. And Abraham believed in the Lord, and the Lord counted it to him for righteousness.

[ 22 : 50 ] righteousness. Abraham believed and God, on the basis of that faith, counted Abraham righteous.

That is, counted him one of his own people. Counted him as a saved one. this verse is quoted in the New Testament two or three times, and each time it is quoted, it makes the response that here we have an example of saving faith.

Here is an example of Abraham's faith, and it's in such a form that it shows to us that it was the faith that proved that Abraham was right with God.

It was the faith that is the evidence that that person is saved, that that person is right in God's sight, and entitled to all the blessings of God.

Paul talks about it in Galatians chapter three, for instance. Can you try and stay with me as I read you just one or two verses? Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness, know ye therefore that they which are of faith the same are the children of Abraham.

[ 24 : 30 ] And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel and to Abraham, saying, in thee shall all nations be blessed.

So then, they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham. What Paul is saying there is that Abraham's faith at this point is an example of justification by faith.

Abraham had a faith that showed that he was right and accepted before God.

God. He was justified. And you've heard the way that's sometimes put, justified, never sinned, accepted as righteous before God and therefore entitled to all the other blessings of God's salvation.

Justification is the root blessing, if you like, of all the other blessings of salvation. They all come with justification.

[ 26 : 01 ] If we are justified, if we're counted righteous in God's sight, then we are sure, because God tells us in the Bible that every other blessing of salvation is ours.

in Christ when we're right with God. And what the New Testament is saying is that Abraham's experience with God at this time is an excellent example of that faith that justifies.

That faith that is the evidence that we're right with God. God was giving promises to Abraham and they were promises that when the whole plan of God in the New Testament was fulfilled, we would see clearly that they were really the promises of salvation.

He was saying to him, in you shall the nations of the world be blessed. I'm going to give you a seed that's like the stars of heaven. I'm going to save a people for myself.

through this plan that is beginning with you Abraham. I've got salvation and I'm going to give it through this plan that I've prepared.

[ 27 : 26 ] The promise was given and Abraham believed it. and God said, that's the basis on which I make people right with me.

That's the basis on which I accept my people. That's the basis on which I save them. Abraham believed and he was justified.

right. What about this faith? What do we need to know further about it that we might see if it is our faith tonight?

Two things really. It was a personal faith. That is, it was faith in a person. And that's always the way with saving faith.

Saving faith is personal. Abraham believed the Lord. By this time he knew a little bit about his God.

[ 28 : 51 ] He knew that he was trustworthy. Oh, he was having struggles. But he knew that so far God had been faithful to his promises and he believed the Lord.

He believed the creator God because the God of Abraham is the God of the Bible. The God who has created us. And then the Bible later on makes clear that the God of Abraham is the God who came in the person of Jesus Christ.

So that Jesus can say, believe in God, believe also in me. Or Jesus can say, he who has seen me has seen the Father also. This is the God in whom we believe.

We have to make that point. Maybe some of you think it's too obvious, but we have to make it when we're preaching the gospel in these days because we live in a multi-faith society.

And we live in a society where more and more people are saying, God is who you want him to be. If you want him to be like the God that the Muslims describe, then that's okay.

[ 30 : 07 ] If you want him to be the sort of God that the Hindus describe, and then, of course, you'll have a multiplicity of gods, then that's okay. If you want him to be the God of the Buddhists, a rather strange, mysterious God, then that's okay.

And then, if you want him to be something like the God of the Bible, then that's okay as well. But it's not okay for God. The Bible is quite dogmatic on this point.

God himself speaks. The God who was created, the God who is the God of Abraham, the God who came in Jesus Christ, the God who has revealed himself as three persons, that one God.

He comes and he says, I am the Lord and besides me there is none else. And saving faith is faith that believes in the God of the Bible.

That's the only faith that saves. The faith that believes in Christ because he is God, the Lord.

[ 31 : 29 ] And Abraham knew the Lord. And he believed the Lord, we're told.

God and it was counted to him for righteousness. It was a personal faith. Your faith is going to prove to be useless in the end or useless when the trials come if you do not know the God in whom you believe, the God who has revealed himself in the scriptures.

It was a personal faith. And to get another word beginning with P, it was a propositional faith. You see, it was a belief that came out of what God said to Abraham, out of what God promised to Abraham.

And that's always the way with saving faith. it not only believes God, but it believes what he says about salvation and about the way of salvation.

It believes what God proposes and that's why we say it's a propositional faith. It's not just belief in God, but it's belief in God's promise that saves us.

[ 33 : 04 ] God's love and of course the New Testament makes abundantly clear to us what that promise is.

It's the same promise as was given to Abraham. Abraham was told you'll have a seed and of course part of that seed the New Testament tells us was to be the Lord Jesus Christ and because of that God could say to Abraham you're going to have a seed that will be as innumerable as the stars of heaven because not only will you have the physical seed of the Jewish race, but you will have the spiritual seed of all believers in every generation who are going to come the people of God, the

children of Abraham through faith in Jesus Christ.

But now the New Testament has made the propositions, the proposals, the promises much clearer to us that we may be encouraged and helped all the more to believe with that saving faith and it will be counted to us for righteousness.

But it works in the same way. Abraham was thinking at this particular stage about his lack of physical life to produce seed, to do God's will, to be in line with God's promises.

God said to him, I have the power, I am able, I promise it to you Abraham. And in his lack of physical life and physical power, Abraham believed God.

[ 35 : 11 ] He believed in the Lord and he believed what he said. And the Bible says that's an example of saving faith.

He believed and it was reckoned for righteousness. It's an example of saving faith because we find ourselves in exactly the same position as Abraham.

Only our lack is not a lack of natural life, probably. But it's a lack of spiritual life. And we stand before God in need of his blessing, in need of knowing the fulfillment of his promises of salvation and eternal life.

That we come before him and we have no spiritual life, we have no spiritual power. that God comes to us with his promises.

And God says, but I have a way of bringing that spiritual life to sinners. I've worked out a way through my son, Christ Jesus, through sending them to die in the place of sinners and to earn that new life for them.

[ 36 : 33 ] and if you believe in me and if you believe in my promises and if you believe in the Christ that I have sent and in what he has done to bring this spiritual life into sinful people, you will be saved.

and there's no other way. And that's always the way. The level of understanding from time to time may vary, but it's the same faith that's saving faith.

It's the faith that takes God at his word. I've done it and this is the way that I've done it. And this is the way that my promises in you can be fulfilled as you stand there without spiritual life.

it. And the people are saved who like Abraham believe God and trust God because of who he is, because of what he has done, and because of what he proposes.

us. And so I can say to anybody here this evening who is still unsaved, you're conscious that you're without spiritual power to be a child of God, to walk in the ways of God, to know the blessing of God for eternity in your life.

[ 38 : 29 ] God comes through the Bible tonight, through the gospel, and he says, I've worked out a way.

I've sent my son. He has dealt with all the problems. He has dealt with all the difficulties. He has satisfied me in his work for sinners.

Believe, and you'll be saved. And if you believe, it will be true of you, what was true of Abraham, that he believed, and God counted it for righteousness.

one last word. For those who still struggle, for those who find doubts welling up in their minds, I encourage you, when you go home, to go to the last verses of Romans chapter 4.

Perhaps, if possible, read them in a modern version. where the Holy Spirit is so open there, and he tells us, Abraham struggled in faith.

[ 39 : 54 ] He struggled against doubts, but how did he struggle against the doubts? By believing. There were doubts, there were difficulties, there was his old body, there was Sarah's old body.

How could it be? You have your doubts when it comes to your salvation. There's my sinful flesh, there are the past sins, there are the particularly difficult circumstances in which I live.

How can I be a Christian? The doubts you see come in, and they can only be dealt with the way that Abraham dealt with them. He believed in the face of the doubts.

He saw the doubts, he faced up to the doubts, he saw the difficulties, he faced up to them, but above them all he saw God and his promises, and he believed, and God dealt with the doubts.

And you must believe and God will deal with the doubts. Amen.