

A Starry Sky and a Son: The Promises of a Promise-Maker

(Scripture: Genesis 15:1-6)

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Anyone ordered from Amazon this week? Or maybe another favourite online store? When you make a purchase online, usually you are given a range of days or hours! when you can expect your delivery, your package, to come around to your house. When the package is shipped out, there is usually more clarity given on those dates and times, and when it is about 24 hours out, you get notification that it is 24 hours. And then it gets delivered, and then you get notification that it got delivered and is on your porch. And if porch pirates don't get to it before you, you have successfully received your package. Voila. Promises made. Promises kept.

Let's say you're not an online shopper. Ever walked into a store to buy a fridge or a big item and then also set a date for that delivery? Usually you get a phone call a few days out finalizing the day and then you get a hour range of when to expect it. Ie morning, or afternoon slot, etc. Usually a good company will be on that delivery and meet your expectations. They try—though not successful all the time—to meet your expectations because they want to keep you as a customer. Promises made. Promises kept.

A few years ago, during Covid, my husband I bought a couch. It was a basic couch set. From the time we ordered the couch to the time it was delivered took 3 months. Remember that season when everything was delayed because of covid? Eventually the couch arrived. But there was a problem with the couch. It didn't come with legs. There were no legs to the couch. I was expecting legs for the couch. So we got on the phone with the company explaining there were no legs for the couch. They promised 6 weeks. It took another 3 months later to get legs for our couch! Timing is everything. Expectations are real.

But what happens when we don't get something on our timeline? What if something doesn't meet our expectations? When people disappoint us?

Usually, we think that if someone makes a promise, they should keep it. It's just simply good business, or good morals, or good ethics, a sign of good character. We make a bunch of promises in our lifetime, but we probably only keep a few. We might keep the promise of our marriage vows. We might keep the promise of a secret. Our promises hold no power unless there is moral, upright, integrity-filled character along with it. And maybe you know better than to trust someone and their promise because they have let you down before. Maybe people don't trust you and your promises because of something you did in the past. The truth is our promises sometimes come up empty; we sometimes lack the power in our promises. **Because it always matters WHO makes the promise. It matters who the Promise-Maker, and Promise-Keeper is. Who is the person—and what is their character like—behind the promise? Can they be trusted to come through? Can I hope they will be there when I need them?**

Today we read Genesis 15:1-6. This is part of a greater story about a man named Abram. He is a pretty important biblical character. Abraham had a lifetime journey of discovering God and his promises for him. And yet still he asked, and like Abram, we ask the question: *Can God be trusted to follow through with His promises?* Can we put our hope in the God of Promises? For some of us, that might be an easy “yes”. For some of us, it might be a “I don’t yet..”. For some of us, we might be in a season where we perceive God to be silent or distant, or unengaging. For some of us, we might agree that we want to trust God but trusting Him daily is the true challenge of our faith journey. Do we expect him to do something in our circumstances in life whatever that might be? Do we anticipate God to come through and fulfill His promises in our reality? in my job? in my relationship? Do we live with the anticipation that God will fulfill His promises? Abraham didn’t always get it right. In fact, he got it wrong a few times. But through him, through his descendants, through his nation, the Promise was born and who fulfilled the promise of God with us.

Why Abraham? What made him so special? I really don’t know. He really was an average guy. Yet, God got his attention, and Abraham listened. God made promises with him. And Abraham trusted God. But then he didn’t always trust God. Then God would make more promises with him. And Abraham sometimes trusted God. And this would happen again and again. Do you know what I love about God’s Word? It not only reflects God and tells us about who God is, but also tells us about who we are as humans. And I wonder if some of us will see ourselves in Abraham today. Let’s look into Abram’s story.

Abram story begins in Gen. 11/12, when his dad Terah became nomadic and moves from a place called Ur of the Chaldeans to a place called Canaan. He settles in a place called Harran. Then the story turns attention to his son, Abram, in Gen. 12. It begins with a God getting Abram’s attention. Now the last time God came down to speak to humans was the Tower of Babel, so generations have passed since. But God had his eye on Abram and meets him: Gen. 12:1-3: the first of the promises: *Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.*”

The story of Abram begins with God making a promise with him, just some guy from Harran. Yet this would be the first promise of many, and not the only interaction either. This is the beginning of a relationship here.. Let’s read that again, God says: I will show you...I will make you...I will bless you...I will bless those around you... etc. There are promises, yes, but more importantly, this is about who God is and how He is establishing a relationship of trust or faith with Abram, and if Abram will trust God and His promises to him. God asks Abram to move and Abram, trusting God, does. But he doesn’t always. It isn’t going to be an easy.

Abram leaves Harran, his father’s country, and sets out for Canaan, and stops at the site of a great tree of Moreh at Shechem (you know, that place, the place with the great tree...). Then God appears again to Abram to make a second promise, this one is about land: “vs 7: “The Lord appeared to Abram and said, *“To your offsprings I will give this land.”*”

Abram’s response? He builds an altar to the Lord there (a time of communing/worship). Then off he goes and moves again to the hills of Bethel, and pitched his tent there. And there he built another altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord (again a time of communing and worship). We get the idea that this was a season of closeness with God, with Yahweh. Then he continued to the Negev. And then there is the episode in Egypt... Famine hits the land and naturally when famine hits anywhere, people migrant. So Abram is forced to go to Egypt where he lies that his wife Sarai is his sister; this causes confusion and disease on the house of Pharoah.

Abram wasn't meant to stay in Egypt. Abram leaves Egypt and returns back to the Negev. Here Abram returns to Bethel, the place where he had been earlier, and he calls on the name of the Lord (he returns to a place of his faith and trusting). In vs. 14 of Chapter 14: God makes a third promise to Abram: *Look around from where you are, to the north and to the south, to the east and to the west. All the land that you see I will give you to and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go walk through the length and breadth of the land for I am giving it to you.*"

By this point, Abram was rich. He had sheep, cows, land, possessions, even military strength and presence. He had many promises from God. He had seen God's promises fulfilled, promises of the land, promises of blessings. Promises after promises, in fact. Year after year goes on. And yet no son to his name. One promise remains unfulfilled. A fourth promise rolls out in Gen. 15 in a very frank conversation between God and Abram: "*Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield, your very great reward.*" What does Abram say back to God? *What can you give me since I am childless? You haven't given me a child yet. Now a servant is going to be my heir!* God takes him outside and tells him: *Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them. So shall be your offspring. This is the promise of descendants, of a great nation.* Then we read: *Abram believed the Lord and he credited to him as righteousness.*" In this closeness, this trusting of God, Abram believes. Then the God instructs Abram to bring him a heifer, a goat and a ram, halving the animals and then a dove and a young pigeon, arranging them before the Lord. God made his covenant with Abram with presentation of a smoking fire pot and a blazing torch, promising again: "*To your descendants I give this land...*" *Can God be trusted to follow through with his promises?* In this moment, Abram is full of faith in God's promises.

Then the story takes another turn. And not too different from you and I, we read of how Abram and Sarai taking matters into their own hands in a season of what seems like silence from God. And the challenge of trusting the God becomes harder. Sarai, Abram's wife, tells him to go sleep with her slave, Hagar, so that they could have a family through her. Abram sleeps with Hagar, she does become pregnant, and she receives a vision from the Lord, has a profound angel experience in the desert, and gives birth to a son, whom Abram names as Ishmael. But it wasn't Ishmael's line that would receive the blessing of the covenant with God. A few years after this incident, God appears again to Abram, into chapter 17, and says: *I am God Almighty. walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers...* God says *"As for me, this is my covenant with you...You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram, your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be our God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan where you now reside as a foreigner I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."*

From this God gives Abram a new name, Abraham, instructs Abraham and every male after to be circumcised and that Sarai will be now be called Sarah. God instructs Sarah and Abraham that they will have a son and that he will be called Isaac with whom God will establish his covenant. Abraham trusts God and shows his trust in God with the act of circumcision for every male, including himself, to be covenant and committed to God.

Even after they take matters into their own hands, God still promises them the son. God didn't give up on them. The story continues. God keeps His Promises. The challenges only increase. It isn't until Gen. 21 that Sarah becomes pregnant and gives birth to her son, Isaac, the first of the stars in the starry sky count.

It's the first verse of Gen. 21, "Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised." Now perhaps, the question is no longer: *Can God be trusted to follow through with His promise?* Time and time again, God is faithful, is trustworthy, is timely, and fulfills his promises. But perhaps the question is: *Can I trust God? What is keeping me from trusting Him more?*

Our story is not too different from Abraham's--well, with a few exceptions like a migration to Egypt and a famine in the land, and other things—. Our story, like Abraham's, is a story of trust in God and his promises for us. Which can I say is easier said than done. Because it isn't a story of a "once and done" trusting in God; this isn't a religion of lip service either. It is an everyday choice whether we trust in Him today, and then tomorrow, and then the day after that. Day in and day out, years after years, we travel on this faith journey, like Abraham, perhaps trusting blindly, but probably, more likely, questioning and doubting, and wondering what God is up to. Why God hasn't come to my increasingly difficult scenario at work? my tense relationship? my physical concern? or why God hasn't intervened yet in the wars across the ocean? or the famine in Sudan? Perhaps, like Abraham, we come to God with our question: *What can you give me when I still don't have a son? What can you give me when I still don't have this unfulfilled promise in my life? What can you give me when my mom suffers? What can you give me when my child suffers? What can you promise me when this really important promise you made to me is still unfulfilled?*

So here is something about God, who I believe God is: He already knows we have difficulty trusting Him, just like He knew that Abraham would have trials of trusting. He knows we have a hard time completely surrendering to a relationship with Him in all areas of our lives. He knows our hearts wander from him. He knows how difficult it is for us to be patient. He already knows when we will lie to make things happen on our timeline, or think we have to produce something to get a result. He already knows when we will lose hope. He already knows we are going to struggle with trusting Him. He already knows our trust in Him will falter. And yet, he is still there. To be with us in the questions. To sit with us in the silence. To wait with us in the confusion. To wander with us in our roaming, just to be with us. To be with us. To be God with us, Emmanuel. To extend Himself to us. To give of Himself in the Promise, hope now revealed and now fulfilled.

It is His Presence with us that is His Revealed and Fulfilled Promise.

It would be thousands of years later, after centuries of prophecies and promises, kings, priests and prophets, a son would be born to a Virgin Mary, the Presence of God Himself entering into our dark nights of the soul, our chaos, our war-torn reality. To meet us in it. To be the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, of a son.

God fulfills His promises and is the complete fulfillment of the Promise.

Why does it matter that God fulfills His promises and is the complete fulfillment of the promise in Jesus Christ?
Because it matters who you put your trust in today.

You can choose today if you want to continue your own life, the way you think best, trying to move things along in your own timeline. You can even choose to live according to someone else's promises in your life, what you think they will do for you, what your boss will do for you, what this career will do for you, etc. OR you can choose to begin your journey, your faith journey, with your Creator, who has always wanted to be with you, who welcomes you to trust Him, and more importantly, invites you to be with Him, and who will never disappoint you or let you go, or abandon you. But I warn you: It might not be in your timeline. It is going to be hard.

Why does it matter that God fulfills His promises and is the complete fulfillment of the promise in Jesus Christ?
Because it changes the way you live today.

Because while we are on this journey of trusting God for his promises, He promised to be with us. As Christians, He came to us in Jesus Christ, Emmanuel. The Babe-King would enter in, walk humbly, pursue righteousness, love compassionately, and go the way of the cross to provide complete reconciliation with God (His Promise of Ultimate Grace). His resurrection would be the complete conquering of all thing death and sin, which held us back from a relationship with Him. He dealt with it all. Our Messiah. Our Saviour. Jesus, our Emmanuel would be the promise of reconciliation with God, victory through God, and hope eternal. Faith in Him takes us right to God and makes us right before God.

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With his Presence with us, in us, before us, behind us, we also have the promise that this is not the end. In this now, His Presence with Us gives us His eternal perspective. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. We wait with the hope of Jesus coming again, and we hold onto the promises of the God of hope.

But in the now, ***we learn together how to live out His Promises to us, His life-giving Hope in us. We gain a heart of gratitude.*** We learn to love people we might otherwise have impatience for. We learn the way of grace. We see people differently. We give to people differently. We respond to people differently. Then we begin to see changes in the people around us.

It's His Presence with us, in us, through us offers others the promise of eternity with God.

Because it isn't a promise that only transforms us as individuals. Christ's presence with us as the revealed and fulfilled promise changes our church, our neighbourhood, our city, our country. We see how the promise of Christ's presence has arrived, is coming and will be coming to the whole world. He is entering into your conversations at the cashier, as you cuddle your grandchildren, as you drive your kids to hockey practice.

This week, I'm going to ask you to do one thing: Write this down: Its from Gen 21:1 "Now the Lord was gracious to _____ as he had said, and the Lord did for _____ what he had promised."

Take 5-10 minutes to reflect on the promises God has already fulfilled in your life. *What was that promise and how did God fulfill it? How did you trust God and believe he would come through?*

Then I want you to pay attention to a moment when you could share how God fulfilled that promise in your own life. I challenge you to take the time to write it down. And then I also challenge you to share it with one other person. Maybe it is a job offer. Maybe it was a pregnancy, and a long-desired baby. Maybe it was a house. Offer the hope of your story to a friend this week. Tell them just how hard it was to wait upon God, but that He kept His promise to you. Tell them of another thing in your life that you are waiting for and tell them how you are holding with Hope to the God of Promises. Promises made. Promises kept. Time and time again.

