

“God Is . . . Faithful”

Text: Genesis 15:1-21

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on May 13, 2018 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Every year 3 million tourists flock to Yellowstone National Park. They come for many reasons but the main reason is to watch one of the greatest geo-thermal wonders of our planet – they eruption of the geyser we call Old Faithful.
 - Old Faithful got its name because of its punctuality and predictability. It erupts more than any other geyser in the Park.
 - On average it erupts every hour and a half, spewing up to 8,400 gallons of boiling water, 130 feet in the air.
- The faithfulness of Old Faithful is awe-inspiring for most people, but for others Old Faithful has become a bit of a bore. Listen to how Philip Yancey describes his experience at Old Faithful.
 - ***“I remember my first visit to Old Faithful in Yellowstone National Park. Rings of Japanese and German tourists surrounded the geyser, their video cameras trained like weapons on the famous hole in the ground. A large digital clock stood beside the spot, predicting 24 minutes before the next eruption.***
 - ***My wife and I passed the countdown in the dining room of Old Faithful Inn overlooking the geyser. When the digital clock reached one minute, we, along with every other diner, left our seats and rushed to the windows to see the big, wet event.***
 - ***I noticed immediately, as if on signal, a crew of busboys and waiters descended on the tables to refill water glasses and clear away dirty dishes. When the geyser went off, we tourists oohed and aahed and clicked our cameras; a few spontaneously applauded. But glancing back over my shoulder, I saw that not a single waiter or busboy – not even those who had finished their chores – looked out the huge windows.***
 - ***Old Faithful, grown entirely too familiar, had lost its power to impress them”¹***
- Today I submit to you that of all the attributes of God, it is his faithfulness that has lost the power to impress us. God’s faithfulness almost bores us.
 - How many of you awoke this morning in great fear, quickly drew in a large breath of air, and yelled out, ***“Oh praise be to God, there is still oxygen to breath today.”***
 - How many of you leapt out of bed, threw open the blinds and exclaimed, ***“Honey, it’s amazing. Come look. The sun came up again today.”***
 - We are very familiar with God’s faithfulness, so much so that it has almost become a bit of a bore. It has lost the power to impress us.
- However, on the other hand, none of us believe with all of our hearts that God is faithful. Perhaps it is because we are so unfaithful. We say one thing and do another. We struggle just to be faithful in little things like keeping appointments and being on time, let alone faithfulness in giving time to our families and keeping our marriage vows.
 - Oh none of us would say with our mouths that we do not believe God is faithful but every time we are anxious about the future we show we don’t really trust God is

¹ Philip Yancey, “What Surprised Jesus”, *Christianity Today*, 12 September 1994, 88.

faithful. Every time something difficult happens in our life and we call God into question we reveal that we don't really believe he is faithful.

- We are continuing on in our series on the attributes of God. The goal of this series is not just to learn facts about God. We start with that but the goal is to learn to trust God with all that we are and in every situation.
 - To that end I want to look again at a passage we looked at a year and a half ago but set it within a bit of a different context. This passage is one of the Bible's great passages on the faithfulness of God and how this should cause us to trust him.
 - So first let me display God's faithfulness from this passage and then let's demonstrate how it enables us to trust him in two key areas of life.

GOD'S PROMISE TO ABRAM

- So let's begin by **(SHOW SLIDE 2) displaying the faithfulness of God** from Genesis 15.
 - In the first eight verses of this chapter God makes a huge promise to Abram. Despite the fact that he and his wife Sarah have never been able to have kids, and despite the fact that he is 75 and she is 65, God promises that they will have a son. Moreover, this son will give Abram descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky. In fact God will change his name to "Abraham", which means, "father of many."
 - Verse 6 tells us that Abram trusts God and believes this promise. Then in verse 7 God makes another promise. He says this son will become a great nation and this nation will inherit the land Abram is standing on. This is rather shocking because it currently belonged to the Amorite nation, a fearsome and powerful people.
- Look at verse 8. **READ 8 - *But he said, "O LORD God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"***
 - Abram wants some solid assurance that God will come through and God gives it. God displays how faithful He is. Are you ready to see the utter faithfulness of God? It is revealed in verses 9-21.
- **READ 9-11 - *He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.***
 - Not quite what you would expect is it? What a scene. Abram drags a heifer out into the field. He not only kills it but then he saws it in two and then drags the one half a few feet away from the first. Then he does the same with a goat and a ram. What a gruesome scene. There is a pathway of blood-soaked ground with animal carcasses acting like decorating stones on either side. To add even more, he kills a dove and a pigeon and lines them up with the other animal remains. Bizarre! How many of you have ever sawed a few animals in half and used them to create a blood soaked pathway?
 - All of this is very strange to our ears but it wasn't strange in ancient times at all. Notice that God did not have to even tell Abram what to do with the animals. Abram knew because it was common knowledge for thousands of years - this is how a person makes what is called a "covenant."

WHAT IS A COVENANT?

- Well, what is a covenant? Let's take a few minutes to answer that question and then come back to the passage.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 3) A covenant is a bond or binding agreement made between two parties.** Even when a person is utterly faithful and can be trusted to do what they say, there are times in life when people need more than our bare word. Heather does not need a vow from me that I will be home at a certain hour but when I asked her to marry me, she wanted more from me than a simple affirmation that I would be her husband. In our wedding ceremony we made vows; oaths sworn before God. These were given before we entrusted our entire selves to each other. A wedding ceremony is a covenant.
 - So a covenant is first a bond or a binding agreement between two parties.
- Secondly, **(SHOW SLIDE 4) in ancient times a covenant was a bond of life and death (a bond in blood).** You might call it 'a bond in blood.'
 - The phrase **"to make a covenant"** literally means, **"to cut a covenant."** It is a reference to blood, meaning that once it is made, it cannot be broken without the spilling of blood.
 - So a common way to make a covenantal oath was to cut an animal in half. Then both parties would walk between the animals. What they were saying by this action was, **"If I should break the covenant that we have made I call down the same curse upon my head as is upon this animal. May I be killed and hewn in two."**
 - It is what is called 'a self-maledictory oath.' Malediction means "curse." It is calling a curse down on yourself if you break the oath.
- In Jeremiah 34 we see a vivid example of a broken covenant. The people had made a covenant with God at Sinai to free their slaves every seven years. But they broke the covenant.
 - So God says in verse 18-20, **(SHOW SLIDE 5) "The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they have made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces...I will hand them over to their enemies...their dead bodies will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth."**
 - We also have many examples from archeology of this blood-bond. An 8th century BC Assyrian text includes the following: **(SHOW SLIDE 6) "This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mati'lu. If Mati'lu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off...the head of Mati'lu be torn off, and his sons."**²
- A covenant is deadly serious. It is a binding bond between two parties that cannot be broken lest blood be spilled. Now are you starting to see what is going to happen here?
 - Remember God has given his word but Abram wants assurance that God will be faithful to make His promise come to pass. God in his grace desires to reassure Abram and all his people of his character – that when he promises something he is faithful and can be trusted to make it all come to pass.

GOD'S SELF-MALEDICTORY OATH

² Cited in Bruce Waltke, *Genesis*, 245.

- Alright, that is enough on covenants. Let's finish up the passage. **READ 12 - As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him.**
 - This is a supernatural darkness. In the midst of it God speaks and tells Abram again that he will indeed give the land to his descendants. And then in verses 17-21 we come to the pinnacle of the story. Now we come to some of the most astounding verses in the entire Bible. These verses send chills down my spine.
 - **READ 17-21 – When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”**
- Alright we need to ask two questions about this verse. First, what is this fire imagery with the torch and flaming fire pot all about?
 - In the scriptures fire represents the presence of God Himself. To Moses, he came in the burning bush and the very ground was considered holy. He was the pillar of smoke and fire that led the Israelites out of Egypt. Mount Sinai was **“covered in smoke, because the LORD descended in fire”** (Ex 19:18). It was the fire of the Lord that fell and burned up Elijah's water-soaked sacrifice and at Pentecost the sign of God's presence was that tongues of fire rested over the heads of those in the Upper Room.
 - So this is the presence of God moving between the hewn animals.
- Second, what is the significance of God's presence moving through the animals?
 - To understand the significance of it let me quiz you with another question. **“What is different between this covenant and how I described covenants to you earlier?”** The answer to this is the heart of everything today.
 - Well it is the same on many levels isn't it? There are two parties involved here. There is a promise given. There are the animals that are cut in half. There is blood. It all seems the same and yet there is one area where it differs from others. What is it?
 - Answer: Only God walks the blood-soaked pathway. Abram does not walk the pathway. Do you see the significance?
- This is astounding. God, the Almighty ruler and Creator of heaven and earth takes upon himself a self-maledictory oath.
 - In other words, he is saying, **“Abram, you want assurance that I am faithful to keep my promises, then here you go. Abram, if I should break this covenant with you. If you should find me to be unfaithful in keeping my word, then may I the Lord of the universe be hewn to pieces. May I be slaughtered. May I be cursed. May I the God of all be destroyed. May I fall into destruction. May God be de-Goded.”**
- In other words, **“When I make a promise I will fulfill it. You can bank everything on my faithfulness.”** And all of this points forward to an even great covenant that God made, not just with Abraham but with all whom Jesus came to die for. Do you remember on the night Jesus was betrayed he took the cup and said, **“This cup is the new covenant in my blood”**?

- On the cross, Jesus' body was torn and his blood was shed. God made a new covenant with His people. It is an eternal covenant. And it is on the basis of the blood of Jesus that we can fully trust the promises of God. For as II Corinthians 1 says, ***“For no matter how many promises God has made they are ‘yes’ in Christ.”***
 - On the basis of Jesus' spilt blood we can trust that God is faithful to make all his promises will come true. For if God did not spare his only Son, but gave him up for us all, that is – if God gave up what is dearest to him, will he not then graciously give us all things?

DEMONSTRATING GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

- So now that we have displayed God's faithfulness, let's turn to part 2: **(SHOW SLIDE 7) Demonstrating God's faithfulness.**
 - I want to show how understanding God's faithfulness enables you to trust God. But I want to show this a little differently.
 - Because God is faithful there are things that God cannot do. This does not mean God is not all-powerful. It means that God cannot do certain things because it would be a denial of his faithful character. This is what enables us to trust him.

GOD CANNOT FORSAKE HIS CHILDREN

- **(SHOW SLIDE 8) First, since God is faithful, he cannot forsake his children.**
 - I will go even further - If God were to forsake his children he would deserve to be slaughtered and hewn in two. That almost seems irreverent to say doesn't it? But I contend that it is not. Why? It is God who puts himself on the line in covenant. He wants to prove his utter trustworthiness to us. In the new covenant, he spilled the blood of His Son and is because of this covenant that we receive promises like:
 - Hebrews 13:5 - ***“Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you”***
 - Romans 8:38-39 – ***“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord”***
- If God breaks these promises, he is unfaithful to the new covenant, which means he is unfaithful to himself and therefore is under curse as a covenant breaker.
 - Now that is comfort for the troubled soul. And oh how we need this comfort. We have spoken this morning of the many areas of pain that are associated with motherhood. You have heard of the pain associated with infertility, miscarriages, and the desire to have children but the pain of not being married. It is always tempted in our pain to feel like God has abandoned us.
 - God cannot forsake his children. He has made a covenant with you through the blood of Christ. You may not feel him near by, you may be overwhelmed by darkness and fear but in recall that your heavenly Father is near.
 - There is a tribe where 13-year-old boys must go through a trial. Even though these boys have never been away from their families, on their 13th birthday they are blindfolded and led miles away into a dark forest where they had to sit on the ground and spend the night. You can only imagine how scary it was for one of these boys. That night he most

likely jumped at the sound of every twig that snapped and every sound of the trees. The terrors of the night would overwhelm many. After what seemed like an eternity the first rays of sunshine would break through. In amazement the boy would see that he was not in the middle of the forest but right on the path and then to his utter astonishment he would see a figure standing only a few feet away, armed with a bow and arrow. It was the boy's father. He had been there all night long.

- Some of you may need these promises to keep sorrow and despair from overwhelming you. And in your heart you wonder, **“Is God really here?”**
 - Oh, rest your soul on the fact that God is faithful to his promise that He will never let anything separate you from Himself.
 - Since God is faithful, he cannot forsake his children.

GOD CANNOT HOLD CONFESSED SINS AGAINST US.

- **(SHOW SLIDE 9) Secondly, since God is faithful, he cannot hold confessed sin against us.**
 - I John 1:9 – **“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”**
 - So there is the promise. Do you feel unworthy to come to God? God says he is faithful to forgive confessed sin. Therefore if God does not forgive confessed sin, He is an unfaithful covenant breaker who deserves to be slaughtered and hewn in two.
 - As Paul writes to Timothy, **“ . . . if we are faithless, he remains faithful — for he cannot deny himself”** (2 Timothy 2:13).
- Oh do you see how God's faithfulness is a rock to stand on in times of trouble? Do you see how it removes worry and fear of the future? All of this depends on God not on you. It is he who has promised. And he is true to himself. Oh friends, let us be thankful for God's faithfulness today. Let us never take it for granted.

THANKSGIVING FOR THE LEAF

- Author Mark Buchanan, whom I have borrowed some thoughts from today, begins a chapter on the Faithfulness of God like this:
 - ***A leaf. Behold a single leaf. So fragile, it tears like paper, crushes in your hand to a moist stain, sharply fragrant. Dry, it burns swift and crackling as newsprint, pungent as gunpowder. Yet a leaf may withstand hurricanes, stubbornly clinging to its limb.***
 - ***Hold it open in your palm. It is perfect as a newborn's smile. Pinch its stem between thumb and forefinger and hold it to the light. Eden bleeds through. Its veins are like bone work in silhouette. This single leaf, joined to the tree, drinks poison from the air...and refuses to return in kind, instead spilling out life-giving oxygen. This leaf tilts to catch the sun, its warmth and radiance, to distill the heat and light down to the shadows, down to the roots, back to the limbs. To shade the earth. To feed you and me.***
 - ***A leaf. God makes these season after season, one after the other, billions upon billions...most for no eye but His own. He does it faithfully, or else I would not live to tell about it, or you to hear.***

- ***Perhaps of all my sins against heaven, this ranks with the worst: Until this moment, I have never thanked God for a single leaf.***
- Perhaps one of our greatest sins against heaven is that we have never thanked God for his unending faithfulness.
 - The sun comes up every day, leaves create oxygen to breath, you never got hit by that car, you ate breakfast today, your sins are forgiven, you are never forsaken, your name is written in the Lamb's book of life.
 - God is the faithful.