

# THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM

## A SERMON

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“He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God.” Romans 4:20

THIS promise refers especially to Isaac, who was to be son, and heir also, of Abraham. But then the first promise which the Lord made to Abraham included every after promise; therefore I shall this morning, in laying before you the several characteristics of this promise given to Abraham, notice it as the Lord expressed the same to him, and as it will apply practically to us; for, said the apostle, it was not for his sake alone that these things were written, but for our sakes also; for if we believe in him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, then the same blessings are ours, the same righteousness set to our account, and the same God is our God.

Our text, then, lies before us in a threefold form. First, *the promise*; secondly, *the decision*, “he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief;” thirdly, *the ascription*, “but was strong in faith, giving glory to God.”

First, *the promise*. And upon this part I will be as concise as possible, only it is a subject that is so attractive and so pleasing that when one begins to speak upon it one hardly knows where to end. For what can be a sweeter subject than this, that the everlasting God should thus condescend to enter into a covenant, and to make to you a positive promise, that promise pertaining to you in everything that affects you in this life, and everything that concerns you in death, this promise concerning you in judgment, and concerning you to all eternity. Why, all things we can desire are not to be compared to these positive promises of God. The apostle Peter might well say that they are exceeding great and precious promises. Let us, then, look at the several forms in which the Lord presented this promise to Abraham. We must look at the use of the promise. The value, of course, of a thing depends upon the use that it is. It is right that we should in all things, temporal and spiritual, be thorough utilitarian's; for therein lies the value of a thing, the usefulness of it; not in the look of it, or the name of it, but the usefulness of it. Now, the first feature of the promise is that of separation from the world. The Lord separated Abraham from the world. It is true he separated him by calling him; but at the same time there was a promise by which in that separation he was to take his stand. The Lord said to Abraham, “Get you out of your country and from your kindred, and from your father's house, unto a land that I will show you.” Ah, when the word of the

Lord first reaches our consciences, something seems to say, Get out of this ungodly world, this destructive world, this world that would destroy you in ultimate perdition; get you out of such a world as this, and seek something that this world cannot afford. And from your kindred; yes, if your kindred near and dear are still blinded, and still unconcerned, nevertheless we must not study that, only in a way of deep regret that it is so; we must go on to seek the Lord. And from your father's house. What a wonderfully separating sort of thing the grace of God is; because it makes a revelation of God that surpasses in value everything else. "Unto a land that I will show you." Now we were at the first ignorant of what this working of mind meant, and we did spiritually as Abraham did literally, for by faith Abraham, when he was thus called, went out, not knowing whither he went. Now he says, I must seek a land; I cannot any longer stay as I am; I am uneasy, I am unhappy. Let us apply that to ourselves. My sins make me uneasy; my state as a sinner makes me unhappy; the thoughts of death, judgment, and hell, make me unhappy. Oh, happy the man that is thus become unhappy; blessed is the man whom you thus chasten, and teach him out of your law, that you may give him rest from the days of adversity. "Unto a land that I will show you." There is the dawning of the promise, or rather the promise dawning in the calling. What is the land that the Lord shows his people? how does he show them that land that is a far off? how does he reveal to them that better country, that glorious and wonderful inheritance that they shall possess forever? And the answer is simply this, that, taking the words as we shall do, spiritually, he reveals to them Jesus Christ; he is the representative of the land that the Lord shows us. And what is the land? What do we see in him, to begin with? Why, we see in him that there is life; we see in him that he has abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light by the gospel; we see that by him a door is opened in heaven; we see by him the glory of our God. And if we ask, How did he abolish death? the answer is, By putting away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And if we ask how he brought life and immortality to light, there is the answer, By the gospel, in contrast to the law; not by works of righteousness done by the creature, but by his own wonderful mediatorial work he has thus abolished death, brought life and immortality to light. We now begin to see the land of the living, the holy land, the pleasant land, the land flowing with milk and honey. Now if we have been thus severed from the world, if we have been thus constrained to look to Jesus, if we thus see him as he himself represents himself when he said, "I am the door, by me if any man enter in he shall be saved;" he is the door, the way into that better country; if we thus see him, and are brought thus far, then the promise, whether we can take it or feel it is ours or not, as much belongs to us as to Abraham. And here comes the promise; the Lord said, "I will bless you;" and so he goes on, pointing to Christ, that in him should all families of the earth be blessed. But let us notice that one part, "I will bless you." Here, then, is the promise. You will see that this promise stands, and you can never appreciate the promise until you understand something about that with which the promise stands in contrast. We are all by nature children of wrath; we are all by nature under the law. But when the Lord thus severs a soul from the world, and causes the soul to seek him, for "You have not forsaken them that seek you;" the Lord says unto such an one, or if he does not yet bring home the word with power, he says concerning that soul, "I will bless you." Now, let the emphasis be laid upon the pronoun you, and that will at once give you the contrast. "I will bless you," implying the discriminating mercy and grace of God. And Abraham took his standing upon this. "And I will bless them that bless you;" those that are partakers of the same calling, and see the same city; for Abraham saw that heavenly land, the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. "I will bless them that bless you, and curse him that curses you." Now if the Lord will bless me, and bless me according to the love wherewith he loves, and according to his ability; and if he has shown to me a city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God,

and if he has shown to me the immutability of his counsel; that being the case, why should I go back to the world? I know how empty and vain it is. Therefore, it is, that while he and his posterity had many opportunities to return, they desired a better country; “wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for he has prepared for them a city.” This, then, is one form of the promise, enabling the people of God to maintain their standing in separation from the world; it is the promise that enables us to do so. And the Lord, when he calls a sinner, makes the man know that he is a sinner, makes him know his need of the promise, and that he can keep his stand only by the yea and amen promise of God.

The second form the promise took was of a providential kind, as you find in the 13th chapter of Genesis. When Lot, a little self-willed, saw the plains well-watered, Well, he says, it appears to me that is the way for me to get rich, that is the way for me to do well. Here are the well-watered plains; I can now reckon up the average increase of my flocks and herds, and in the course of a few years I shall have so and so. There is no doubt he was very careful in these calculations, looking at the appearance of the thing; so that Lot’s confidence was in the fertility of the fields, in the rivers that flowed in these valleys. Not so Abraham; he was of a different opinion; he thought the way in which the Lord would be with him, let appearances be what they might, would be the safest way. Nevertheless Abraham might have felt perhaps a little when Lot left him; and the enemy might have suggested to Abraham, Why, you are not half so well skilled in matters as Lot; see how well he has chosen, and you do not know where to go to. No, but I am waiting for the Lord to tell me. And you know what the consequence was to Lot of his own self-willed choice. Now when Lot thus left Abraham, the Lord stepped in and said, “Lift up now your eyes, and look from the place where you are, northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see, to you will I give it, and to your seed forever.” Here the promise takes a providential form. So, if we know something thus of being brought out of the world, and something of that promise of God by which alone we can with any certainty hope in his mercy, then in connection with this is the assurance of his providential supply as well. Mere providential promises do not include spiritual things; but promises that are spiritual do include the temporal. Hence it is, as the apostle argues, if God spared not his own Son, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things? Thus, the Lord appears in this promise, blessing us with eternal life, and then appears in the assurance of his providence that he would appear for Abraham, and so he did, as you all well know.

The next shape or form the promise took, or in which the Lord presented it, was that of defense. Abraham, in consequence of the victory he had wrought, was exposed to a great many enemies; and he and his, being few, speaking after the manner of men, they might by the powers around them have been swept away; and Abraham was evidently not without his fears upon this matter. But the Lord stepped in and said, “Fear not, Abraham, I am your shield, and your exceeding great reward.” This is only another position or form of the promise. Just as when the Israelites left Egypt the Lord went before them, and then he placed himself between them and their enemies; just so now, how the Lord suits his holy word to our circumstances; and when we are cast down, and afraid of this, and that, and the other, and fears seem to beset us, and horror to lay hold of us, oh, if the Lord is pleased then to step in and bring the promise in that form that just suits where we are, “Fear not, I am your shield;” they must overcome me before they can overcome you; “and I am your exceeding great reward.” I told you I would bless you; and I am of the same mind now; you believed it then, and I am come to renew the promise, that you might believe it afresh, and not

stagger at the promise, but be strong in faith, giving glory to God, "Fear not, Abraham; I am your shield and your exceeding great reward." Ah, do we know what it is to reply something like this, Well, Lord, if you are my defense, if you are my sun and my shield, if you are my exceeding great reward, then give me grace to do what David prays for when he said, "Let them rejoice exceedingly because you defend them." Thus, here is a promise to keep us separate from the world; here is a promise to assure us that our needs for this life shall be supplied; and here is a promise to assure us that he is our shield and our exceeding great reward.

The next form in which the promise appears is that of infallibility. "The Lord brought Abraham forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if you be able to number them; and he said unto him, So shall your seed be." It shall be; you observe, here is no conditionality; "So shall your seed be;" as the stars of the sky, "And Abraham believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness." Thus, then the promise, in addition to the other features, appears in its infallibility. And do we not need this repeated again and again? I feel sometimes impelled and compelled to give you a sermon upon the certainty of the gospel; not that you doubt the certainty of it, but there is a something very encouraging and very strengthening in being reminded of the infallibility of the gospel; that the promises cannot fall to the ground, for with him is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Thus, seeing the promise in Christ, and based upon the immutability of the blessed God, while we are poor fallible creatures, and dare not trust ourselves, we have an infallible God in every sense of the word.

The next form which the promise takes is that of a discriminating character, and it is very expressive. When the Lord was about to minister awful, but righteous judgments to the cities of the plain, he said, "Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do. seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he has spoken of him." What a beautiful representation that is of Christian experience, "I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him." His household are the household of faith; his literal descendants ran away from what Abraham was, and were not truly his children. "If you had been Abraham's children, you would have done the works of Abraham." The same truths that were revealed to Abraham should command his household, the household of faith, and his children after him. Now they that be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham. Why, our souls are so united to Christ and to the sworn promises of God in Christ, it is wonderful the influence they have upon us. They constrain us to pray, as was the case here; Abraham set to and prayed directly for the cities of the plain. The prayer was of course, as it always should be, in submission to God's will, but he began to pray. And just so with us; these truths have a wonderful influence with us; they devote and consecrate us to God, they make us love, rejoice, and trust in him; they make us happy with God. While some of you are fearing that these truths have hardly any influence with you, why, what has brought you this morning? I know you have come because you love the very place; but the central and real motive is because you love these truths, these blessed truths; in other words, the love of the truth is with you; and the love of the truth is the love of the Spirit, the love of Christ, the love of God, the love of the brethren; the love of the truth includes loving the habitation of God's house, the place where his honor dwells. See then how these same blessed truths govern the household of faith, the seed of Abraham, that keep the way of the Lord, and that way is Christ Jesus. I will say nothing about the subordinate departments, but

just a word here; to keep the way of the Lord, namely, Christ Jesus. Why, we are so brought to know the way to heaven that there is no evil within, no circumstance without, no power on earth or in hell that can take us away from the belief that Christ is the way; that way we keep; the wayfaring man, though a fool, shall not err therein. We see that he is the way in which everything we need is done, and everything that we need shall come by him; he is the high priest of good things to come. "And to do justice and judgment." Why, how can you do justice with God, and act in accordance with right judgment with God? There is only one way of doing justice with God, and that is the way described by the Psalmist; the Lord bring us more and more into the same, that we may feel we are prepared to live and prepared to die. David explains how we are to do justice with God. "I will go in the strength of the Lord God." Ah, said Satan, you! a wretch like you! a rebellious worm like you! a poor hell-born creature like you! a poor vile worm of the earth like you! a hard-hearted, ungrateful creature like you! Ah, but then, Satan, these are my reasons: "I will go in the strength of the Lord God; I will make mention of your righteousness, even of yours only." Whatever justice demands, by presenting the Savior's mediatorial work you meet that demand; and thus, you do justice with God, and are thus become justified by faith; mercy and truth meet together; your foot stands in an even place. And judgment, you thus act with judgment; he which is spiritual judges all things. You see then, first, by the promise you are kept from going back again into the world; for, as the Lord lives, instead of my coming to preach this morning, if it were not for the yea and amen promise in Christ Jesus, I should give it all up, and dare not come again; but the promise being yea and amen, I cannot despair while the promise remains what it is. Then, secondly, the promise has a providential form, then a defensive form, then an infallible form, then an influential form: "He will command his children and his household after him, that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he has spoken of him." Just so, by bringing us into this justification by faith, by bringing us to judge righteous judgment, and to come to a right decision, hereby the Lord brings upon us all that he has spoken. Just look at it, not to be brought upon us by some wonderful legal striving, and ceremony, and works that we are to do, but simply by keeping the way of the Lord, that is, Christ; doing justice, making mention of his righteousness, even of his only; and judgment, coming to the same conclusion that he does, that if we are saved, it must be by grace. Hereby the Lord brings upon the people all that which he has spoken.

Now the next form of the promise is of an encouraging kind, to encourage us to obedience, to obey the Lord, to encourage us to serve the Lord, to encourage us to do what he commands. Let us look at it. The Lord commanded Abraham to offer up his son, and Abraham did so in the form there described; and the Lord said, "I have sworn by myself, for because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son; that in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed, because you have obeyed my voice." Now you will at once perceive how easily you may slip into error here. Are we to understand that the Lord blessed Abraham because he offered up his son? Are we to understand that the blessings were to be multiplied because Abraham did this? I do not understand it so. But, say you, it says so. I know it does; but it is hardly ever safe to take a Scripture by itself. When a scripture speaks a little ambiguously, you will go to some other scriptures upon the same subject, or else perhaps if you build up your own interpretation or theory, you will find another scripture come in and sweep your theory away. Hence if I were to assert that Abraham's offering his son as described was the ground of the Lord's promise to him and blessing him, why, other scriptures would deny that and show that the real grounds of Abraham's being blessed were, first, the Lord's good pleasure, and, secondly, the person of his dear Son; and thirdly, the positive promise which he had made. Now in order to

understand what the Lord means there; we will have a scripture upon another subject. You will recollect these words in the 51st Psalm: "Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done this evil;" the word "this" is not in the original; but our translators had got a notion into their heads that David wrote that psalm under the circumstance that the superscription describes, and so they made some parts of the psalm conform to their notion as well as they could; and they inserted the word "this," which has no business there. "Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done evil in your sight." David, as Paul shows in the 3rd of Romans, is not referring to any one particular sin, but to his sinner-ship in general, supposing that he wrote that psalm. "That you might be justified when you speak, and be clear when you judge." Now if I take that just as it is, it will mean that David did evil that good might come. Lord, I have gone on sinning, for if I had not done so you would not be justified, and you would not be clear in your judgments; therefore, Lord, you ought to thank me for all the sins I have committed. Well, say you, that would be dreadful to the last degree. So, it would, friends, and yet it says so. Ah then, you see you must not take things by the mere sound, but look at the meaning. Now of course the meaning is this: The Lord said that I am a sinner; I confess it, and therefore justify what he said. The Lord says I am a lost sinner, a helpless sinner; that I can no more help myself out of this condition than the leopard can change his spots or the Ethiopian his skin; I confess it, and my confession justifies what he has said. That is the way I take it. Now let us come back to Abraham, and the promise. Now, Abraham, because you have thus offered up your son, performed this act of faith, and it is a rule with me, as though the Lord should say, never to let faith go unrewarded; if you give a cup of cold water in faith to one of mine, whatever you give or do in faith in me, it is my rule not to let it go unrewarded; therefore to encourage you in obedience, I will now renew the promise. I have made the promise to you before, and because you have obeyed my voice, I will renew it to you, I will speak it over again to you. There is a great deal in these words, "I being in the way, the Lord led me to the house of my master's brethren." If Abraham's servant had gone some other way instead of the way that was appointed, he would not have succeeded as he did. Just so, friends, this is to encourage us to seek the Lord, and to give up anything and everything that he is pleased to call us to give up. And what will he do in such circumstances? Why, he will renew the tokens of his favor, the manifestations of his love. Therefore, because you have obeyed my voice, because you have given proof that you fear God, I renew this my promise unto you. That is the way I take it. And is it not so? Oh, how many times, the short time we have been in this place, the Lord has thus honored and favored us. How many times some of us have been encouraged and helped. Just as I have been thinking, "I will speak in the name of the Lord no more," and many of you thinking you will never come to the place again, for you get nothing, the Lord comes in at a time and in a way we thought not, renews his former loving-kindnesses, renews the promise, reinstates, strengthens, refreshes us, and makes us happy. Such then is a sample of the different forms of the promise; and I am sure that I am in these views in perfect order, for the truth of God takes all kinds of shapes and forms, adapted to whatever shape or form the necessity of the Christian may exist in. Let the necessity be what it may, whether you need pardon, or help, or direction, or supply, or healing, or strengthening, in all kinds of shapes and forms the word of the Lord appears. Many learned men have said, the Bible is written without proper divisions, and without method; it looks like a mass of confusion. But it is the best ordered written book that ever was, or ever will be. And why is it written in that vast variety, apparently without order? Because the Lord's people would have to pass through many mysterious experiences. My experience is no rule for you. We all have the same kind of experience in substance, but our experiences vary very much in form; and whatever is the malady, there is the remedy, the form of the word of the Lord exactly adapted to our necessity.

I notice secondly, the decision. "He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief." I will assign three or four reasons. The first was, because he understood it. God gave him to understand it, that it was in Christ. He understood the adaptability of it, and therefore did not stagger at it. It was a wise question Philip put to the eunuch, "Understand you what you read?" And you read of a people of no understanding; therefore, he that made them would not have mercy upon them, and he that formed them would show them no favor, dying in that state. Now Abraham had an understanding; he understood that this was a promise in the coming Messiah, a yea and amen promise. The next reason why he did not stagger at the promise was because it was the promise of God. If it had been the promise of a man, of a prince or king, he would immediately see, as we all do, that a thousand things might take place to hinder the fulfilment of the promise. We should say, Well, it is a promise made by a king, but then, though he is a king officially, personally he is a poor, dying, changing mortal like myself. But here was the promise of God. Who is it that has spoken this promise? The self-existent, almighty, unchangeable, ever-blessed God. And how has he spoken this promise? He has spoken it out of his mercy, his love, his pre-arranged and immutable counsel. The third reason that he would not stagger at the promise was because it was made direct personally to him. "Abraham, I am the Lord that called you out of Ur of the Chaldees." It was made personally to him; therefore, it was that he could not stagger at it. A great many ministers find fault with us for doubting and fearing, and they say, "Can't you trust in the Lord? Can't you depend upon the Lord? You are always, doubting, fearing, and cast down." Well, friends, there is no doubt a great deal of unnecessary doubting and fearing about us, and we have our weaknesses, but it does not appear to me that their ideas touch the point at all. It is not the promise of God that we doubt; it is not the truth of God that we doubt; what we doubt is this, and I have had more of it these last two months than I have had before for years, I cannot help it. Well, John the Baptist, after all that he had seen, could doubt; and Jeremiah, after all that God had said to him and done for him, and having even lived to see his own prophecies fulfilled, yet he, at nearly the end of it all, could say, "My strength and my hope is perished from the Lord." If it were not for these cases I should feel that my religion was good for nothing; but when I see John the Baptist, Jeremiah, and others, after witnessing so much of the Lord's glory, nevertheless doubt their interest, I take courage and say, Come, I am not alone, and if I doubt myself, I cannot doubt these men of God. John the Baptist and Jeremiah were good men, and if they doubted after all the Lord had revealed to them, no wonder a poor little creature like myself, that have seen and know nothing in comparison of what these honored and great men of God knew, should doubt and fear. Therefore, when men tell us we ought not to doubt, it is not the truth of God we doubt; and when they try to persuade us that the promise of God is sure, that God is faithful, that his promise cannot fail, that is not the point. The point I long to know is whether I am his or not, whether the promise is to me or not. And I would not say a word, if I knew it, to discourage any one, but it is a very bad sign when a person is what they call converted, and from a little reformation and smooth behavior, and a little church or chapel going, logically comes to the conclusion that the promise is his, that his sins are forgiven, that all is well. Here is no conviction, no soul trouble, no cutting up, no casting down, no trembling, no seeking after the promise being brought home with power. Therefore, one reason, and I look upon it as one of the chief reasons why Abraham staggered not at the promise, was because it was direct to him. If the living God were to speak home a promise to you, and assure your soul, by the power of his Spirit beyond all doubt that you are his, why, your faith in him would be unbounded. Confidence! say you. I should not care what God may demand; he can enable me to do anything. See the wonders that the Old Testament saints did, as

recorded in the 11th of Hebrews. What was the secret? Why, God brought home the word with power, and assured them that he was their God. Let me feel sure beyond all dispute that this God is my God. I look at his omnipotence, and I say, What can he not do? I look at his love, at his mercy, at his various perfections, what can he not do? Here I may have unbounded confidence. Some men tell us, Well, the Lord does all he can, and you must do your part. That is the jargon which the apostle would call vain jangling. The blessed God never made a conditional covenant for the salvation of a sinner. The Lord might as well have given a cobweb for the salvation of a sinner as to have given a conditional covenant. A conditional covenant! There is a valley full of dry bones; hear it, all of you; the Lord makes a covenant that if these dry bones will quicken themselves; if these dry bones will come to God; if these dry bones will rise up, why, then they shall become men, and stand up on their feet, an exceeding great army! Why, my hearer, would you charge the all-wise God with such infinite foolishness as that? No; "You dry bones, hear the word of the Lord." The word comes with power; there is a noise and a shaking; the word does not return void, but accomplishes what the Lord pleases, and prospers in that whereunto he sends it. Thus, then, one great remedy for staggering at the promise is to know it is ours. I do pray for you for this, for I had my fears a few weeks ago that my end was coming; I say "fears." I did not feel I could die. I do feel a most solemn prayer to God that not one of you may come to a dying hour in that state of mind; for I can tell you it is a terrible, an awful state of mind, when you feel eternity is present, your sins are present, the judgments of God are present, the promise at a distance, Christ at a distance, everything that would comfort you at a distance. Ah, mysterious are the ways of the Lord; and if I had died in that state of mind, I think some of you would not have known what to make of me. It has made me feel very, very much for those of the dear children of God that do die in that state. Bless the Lord, it cannot destroy them, because their unbelief is not infidel disbelief; they do not disbelieve in Christ, nor in the gospel, nor in the promise, but they cannot see their own interest in it. It has given me a great feeling for you in this respect, as well as for myself, and I do desire to be more earnest and that you may be more earnest, that the Lord may bring us nearer and nearer to himself. Therefore, when people blame us for doubting and fearing, they do not come to the point. They talk as though we doubted the Lord's truth; that is not it. I like the remedy applied to the right part. Well, say you, whose fault is it? There is no fault in the case, friends.