

The faith that counts

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[0 : 00] Well, hi, everyone. I'm Jansen Conron, and it's so good to be with you today. I'm a lecturer at Sydney Missionary and Bible College, and I've got really fond memories of Brian and Chin Yin and the three years they were able to spend with us here in Sydney.

My wife and I were born and spent most of our lives in the United States, but we've been living here in Sydney for over 15 years now. We actually have three very Aussie kids, so my wife and I are officially outnumbered now.

It was only last year that I took my first chance to go to a live Australian rules football game. This is a uniquely Australian game that's quite significantly different than rugby, but really that's beside the point.

What I want to focus on is that somehow I ended up sitting right next to the loudest, most obnoxious fans in the entire stadium. You might know the crowd I'm talking about, people who don't care about anything or anyone else but their beloved team.

In this case, the Sydney Giants, sporting orange hair, bare-chested men with orange and black stripes, almost non-chanting they were going through.

[1 : 21] And one particular chant really caught my attention. It went like this. I believe that we will win. I believe that we will win.

It kept going. I believe that we will win. I've been watching the NBA finals in America recently, and there's a similar banner hanging in the stadium, just believe.

I don't know if you guys have this kind of mentality there in Malaysia or not, but there seems to be an assumption in Western culture that believing has some kind of a built-in power on its own.

Belief, belief, belief, and belief alone can just make great things happen. On the other hand, then there's an almost opposite sentiment out there.

That is that belief is worthless. It's just unfounded superstition. It's for those who aren't smart enough to think through the evidence for themselves.

[2 : 22] There was a survey done that asked the following question. Do you agree that when Christians use the word faith, they mean that believing something even though it's not supported by evidence?

The result, of course, was that many, many non-believers believe that was what faith was. Something, believing in something not supported by the evidence. Mark Twain was a famous 19th century American writer.

He captured this sentiment when he wrote that faith is believing what you know ain't so. Faith is believing what you know ain't so.

So how can we as Christians avoid the danger of soaking up these kinds of false ideas, false understandings of what is really one of the Bible's most important themes?

The risk is that we end up treating belief as only so much silliness, something that's just really irrelevant to my everyday life.

- [3 : 36] What's at stake is not just winning a silly contest in the case of Australian rules football, just kicking a wobbly ball through a couple of upright poles.
- According to the first couple chapters of Genesis, and I know you guys have been diving into Genesis in the last few weeks, what's at stake is our ability to live our lives in sync with creation, to live in harmony with the kind of blessed life that our creator designed us to have in Genesis 1.
- The Hebrew word shalom captures this well. It means well-being, wholeness. That's what God wants for us. We could say that Genesis 15 here emphasizes the lifting of the burden of unnecessary anxiety.
- Studies today are showing unprecedented levels of anxiety, especially among younger people. And I'm guessing you have similar problems there in Malaysia.
- Anxiety, it's an enemy that I'm guessing most of us struggle with at some level. Fortunately, to read the Bible well is kind of like watching, there's an American TV show called Mythbusters.
- [5 : 00] You might have seen it, but it's a reality show that they're trying to expose as false ideas in the culture that most people just take for granted to be true.
- And the Bible's kind of like this myth-busting show. The Bible is constantly exposing as false. If we read it well, it will expose as false so many of the ideas that our culture likes to say are true.
- So we're going to look here in Genesis 15 to see how it busts up some of the myths that we tend to absorb from our culture about what faith in the Bible is, about what biblical belief is.
- So we're going to look at this under three main points. First, biblical faith, it's not a blind, irrational faith. It's not a pie-in-the-sky faith.
- Secondly, it's not an impressive, halo-wearing faith. A far-be-it-from-me-to-have-it kind of faith. And third, it's not a silent, unquestioning faith.
- [6 : 10] It's a shut-up-and-believe-it kind of faith. So let's get into the story. Back in chapter 14, some of you guys will be familiar with this.
- Abraham has just been blessed by God so much that he's become a new regional power in the area. In fact, when five kings from the west in Mesopotamia invade Canaan, they even kidnap Lot, Abraham leads a military coalition that defeats those invading kings.
- So when we come to verse 1 here, in chapter 15, Abraham has just recently risen victoriously to become a Middle Eastern sheikh to be feared.
- So look at verse 1. After this, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision. Do not be afraid, Abraham.
- And we might think, after his big victory, Abraham is on top of the world. He should be the one that everyone fears, right? But this kind of success in life, it often only ends up hiding internal insecurities and anxieties.
- [7 : 32] Abraham here is fearful. It's not made explicit, but many think he's worried about those kings that he's just driven away. What's going to happen when they come back in vengeance?
- So God says in the second half of verse 1 there, I am your shield, your very great reward. Now, God is a shield.
- It's a picture of his commitment to fight to protect Abraham. In Hebrew, it echoes the word delivered back in chapter 14 that comes from the same base Hebrew word.
- So there, in chapter 14, it was said that God delivered Abraham from his enemies. Used here now, in chapter 15, verse 1, the word shield, it's a reminder of God's deliverance.

That it's not limited to the battlefield. Now it's going to show itself in a new situation. God's deliverance extends to other areas of life than that which weigh upon his people.

[8 : 46] And as we'll see here, to areas of life that often cut much deeper to the heart than anxieties and fears of physical battle.

Verse 2 then tells us that Abraham's anxieties are also bound up with the fact that he still hasn't got the son that God has promised.

That is 10 years back earlier in chapter 12. So recall back in chapter 12, God promised Abraham a son that would become a great nation.

And that that nation would restore creation's blessing and creation's shalom to the world. Ancient Hebrew can sometimes be difficult to translate.

The NIV here in verse 1 has God saying, I am your reward. But if you happen to have an ESV translation, or really most any other English translation, they agree with the option that's put in the NIV footnote.

[9 : 58] And that is, to translate this, your reward will be very great. Your reward will be very great. So the reward is probably not God, but some kind of great wealth that God is promising Abraham.

But either way, in chapter 14, when the spoils of victory were being offered to Abraham, he had turned them down. Because he didn't want to be beholden to other Canaanite kings, like the king of Sodom.

So after turning down those spoils, God is here saying, look, I'm going to make up for all those riches that you just passed up after the battle there, Abraham.

God's saying, you'll get yours, Abraham. Just wait. I think that the reward is actually referring to the promised land that really is going to become the focus of the second half of our chapter.

But either way, Abraham basically here says, what difference does such land make or such wealth make?

[11 : 09] I don't have a child to pass it on to. And certainly for a man of his time, an heir was the most important thing in his life.

Abraham said, so look at verse two. Abraham said, Oh, sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless? And the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus.

And Abraham said, you have given me no children. So a servant in my household will be my heir. Abraham may be anxious about foreign armies, but he's also anxious about life not coming together as he had planned.

Can anyone possibly relate to that? God has been pretty clear that Abraham is going to have a child, a son of his own, who would be his heir.

This hasn't been happening like he thought it should have. So Abraham has decided to take the matter into his own hands and appoint Eliezer of Damascus as his heir.

[12 : 20] Now, why Damascus? Again, we need to look back to chapter 14. There, God delivered Abraham, it says, near the Syrian city of Damascus.

So near Damascus, God had delivered Abraham. Now, with Eliezer of Damascus, Abraham is seeking to deliver himself.

I'll say that again. God delivered Abraham in chapter 14. But here, Abraham is seeking to deliver himself. And we get God's response to this in verse 4.

Then the word of the Lord came to him. This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir. And then we see God's character of compassion in verse 5.

He took him outside and said, look up at the heavens and count the stars, if indeed you can count them. Then he said to him, so shall your offspring be.

[13 : 27] And next we come to the key verse for which Abraham is so rightly famous. Verse 6, Abram believed the Lord, and he, the Lord, credited it to him as righteousness.

Believing the Lord, it's exactly the right response. And believing the Lord is exactly the right solution to Abraham's anxieties.

Is it blind belief? Is it irrational, pie in the sky kind of faith? Is it believing against all the evidence? Or is it what you know ain't so kind of belief?

No. Biblical faith, biblical belief rather, there is a well-grounded trust. Note that belief here has an object, the Lord.

And when the Lord points to the stars of the sky in verse 5, we're reminded again in chapter 14 that God is twice there referred to creator of the sky and the earth, creator of the heaven and the earth.

[14 : 47] And this, of course, echoes the very first verse of the book of Genesis. God created the sky and the earth. God created the heaven and the earth.

If God can create so many stars, how much more can he keep his promise of a son? That's the logic to Abraham, isn't it?

In fact, what could be better evidence for God's ability to give Abraham not just a son and heir, but uncountable heirs?

What could be better than to know that God created uncountable stars? Biblical faith is not blind, irrational faith.

It's based on God's past proven power. We saw that the word shield is an echo of God's deliverance of Abraham in chapter 14.

[15 : 49] That deliverance is another point of evidence here. God has shown himself trustworthy in the past. He can be trusted for the future.

So biblical faith is not blind, irrational faith. It's based on God's character as trustworthy. So if biblical faith is not blind, irrational, pie-in-the-sky faith, but rather it's based on God's past proven power and character as trustworthy, well, what's that mean for us?

I think that being a Christian is not as irrational as it's often portrayed to be. The belief of those fans in the stadium I was in, I believe we can win, that was irrational.

In fact, that day, the Sydney team lost by 60 points, and that's a lot. I think that Christianity actually is the most rational thing to believe.

How so? Well, we could go in a million directions here, but since God is pointing Abraham to the stars, let's take a look with him at the stars for a second.

[17 : 10] Just in our galaxy, the Milky Way galaxy, our sun is only one of 300 billion other stars.

Just one of 300 billion other stars and solar systems out there just in our galaxy. But we're just one galaxy. Well, from what science knows, our galaxy is one of 100 billion other galaxies.

You see, planet Earth is the smallest of dots. And your life is just a puny speck on that dot.

So, how can we not think our life is totally devoid of purpose significance? At the same time, everything within us, I think, revolts against the notion our lives have no significance.

Isn't that itself not great evidence that something is making us significant? Isn't that great evidence for a God that makes us significant?

[18 : 23] You see, all practical logic screams out at us that our actions matter deeply. If today I happen to go driving, drive through a crosswalk in the town, local town here, and hit a toddler and flee from the scene, only the most irrational person is going to say there's no significance in my actions or no significance to that toddler's life.

To believe that our lives mean something because God has created us, that is extremely sensible. Now, can Christianity be proven true?

I think there are lots of good arguments all added up. I think they're amazingly persuasive, but they're not definitive proof.

Abraham had no definitive proof and neither do we. But in reality, we don't require definitive proof for most things we believe in, do we?

You probably already believe I'm originally from America because I told you and maybe somebody can detect a bit of my accent, but you can't prove it beyond all doubt.

[19 : 45] Not even my wife has definitive proof I was born in America and she herself is American. So, see, is there definitive proof for Christianity?

No. But neither is there definitive proof for any other theory that explains why you're alive, why you're there in Malaysia listening to this sermon in the year 2020.

I recently read an article in the New York Times newspaper that focused on serious scientists that are arguing that mindless evolution cannot account for the orderly laws built into the universe.

Of course, these scientists aren't saying, well, the laws must have been put there by personal God that probably wouldn't be printed in the New York Times. What these scientists are saying is the laws of the universe are all part of a computer code written by alien life.

That is, the chances are, we're all part of a giant computer simulation run by aliens. Elon Musk is a billionaire tech entrepreneur, Tesla and SpaceX fame, you've probably heard of him.

[21 : 13] He has said that the odds are actually extremely low that we're all not in a computer simulation. He gave it one chance in billions that we're not part of a computer simulation.

So, these scientists, they've got their own kind of faith, don't they? Their own kind of beliefs. And certainly it's debatable just how rational these beliefs are.

In contrast to all such speculation, Abraham's belief, it's in God, and it's not blind, irrational, pie-in-the-sky faith, but it's a well-grounded trust.

They're based on a God who's shown himself powerful, shown himself trustworthy. Maybe you're listening, watching today, and thinking about believing in God for the very first time.

Or maybe you're a Christian who's recently had your own confidence in God's existence shaking. Either way, don't buy the myth that says biblical belief is just so much irrational pie-in-the-sky irrelevant nonsense.

[22 : 36] Biblical belief is a rational, well-grounded trust in a God who has proven himself trustworthy. Secondly, biblical faith is not an impressive, halo-wearing faith, a far-be-it-for-me-to-have-it kind of faith.

Let me ask the question from verse 6 here. What impressive act does Abraham perform to be considered righteous? What does he do to have a right relationship with a holy, perfect God?

Of course, the answer is nothing. Abraham believed in the Lord. And the Lord credited it to him as righteousness.

The second half of the chapter only makes this more clear. Look at verse 7. He also said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.

But Abraham said, O sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it? Once again, Abraham replies to God with a question.

[23 : 57] Speaking of this land you promised God, how can I be so sure I'm going to receive it? God's answer in the rest of the chapter is a formalized covenant agreement that really writes God's commitment to Abraham in blood, we might say.

This chapter, in fact, has been called the foundational Old Testament text for all God has promised for the world. In verses 9, 10, and 11, animals are cut in half and placed in a row two by two.

And the word in Hebrew for making a covenant actually is literally to cut. And what all the details of this ceremony mean is very much debated.

Many think to pass between the animals and the pieces of the animals is to commit to the covenant. And it's a way of saying if I fail to keep my side of the bargain, may I be cut up just like these animals.

And so look at verse 17, what there passes between the animal pieces. It's a smoking fire pot and a blazing torch.

[25 : 27] So most interpreters think that these symbolize God who like a pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire in Exodus.

God passes between the pieces. And so in a sense he's kind of signing his name on the dotted line of the covenant agreement. Some think that God is here then inviting a curse upon himself if his promises don't come to pass.

And some even think this actually happens when Jesus is cursed on the cross. Fascinating to think about, but I think quite hard to be really sure about.

But what we can be sure about, what does seem clear here is that Abraham's impressive actions are not the basis for this relationship.

Just to make this crystal clear, Abraham in verse 12 is put into a deep sleep for the whole thing. Wow. God alone is the one who passes between the hands.

[26 : 38] the only impressive thing Abraham does in the whole chapter is that he believes. He recognizes his own inadequacy.

He recognizes his own unresponsive, sorry, his own unimpressiveness, his own inadequacy, his own unimpressiveness. So, biblical faith is not an impressive halo-wearing faith.

faith. You might be tempted to look at Brian or other church leaders and say, they have such an amazing faith in God.

I could never have that kind of faith. But to say that is not to have true biblical faith in mind. Just before COVID hit, my family and I took a trip to Yosemite National Park in California, we got to see El Capitan, which is a cliff face that goes almost two and a half kilometers straight up.

You might have seen some of the great documentaries that have been made on the quest to climb this cliff face. Climbing it was once considered impossible, but it's now been done, not only has it been done, but it's being done without any ropes.

[28 : 05] This is called free soloing. Today, in the last number of years, many who do this free soloing, that is they're climbing up just with their bare hands, they do it with parachutes on their backs.

So, when they're up there two kilometers, two kilometers high above the valley floor, and they fail to keep their grip, they fall back from the wall, well, all is not lost.

They can put their faith in the parachute and sail back to the ground safely below. faith is seeing that you can't save yourself.

It's an admission that you have failed, you are a failure, and the only thing left is to trust in the very thing that can save you.

Once you're falling, once you know you're falling, well, there's nothing impressive about trusting in your parachute, right? biblical belief then leaves no room for a spiritual hierarchy.

[29 : 23] Biblical belief dismantles any kind of spiritual caste system that we might want to create. It's not about what you do, biblical faith. It's about what God does for you.

This means there's no room for feeling inadequate or less than in church. We should never be hindered from coming to church because of some feeling of our inferiority.

On the flip side, feeling superior should never be a part of the Christian life either. We're all equal before the Lord.

We're all equally unimpressive failures. believers. To believe as a Christian, to have faith as a Christian is to be unimpressive and yet to trust in God's impressiveness.

more, I think, can even be said here. Feeling inadequate, feeling less than or insecure about who we are.

[30 : 34] It's almost part and parcel of what it means to be human. But our society today, I think, is only making it worse. If you want to be attractive, then flashing on your computer screen are the most attractive people in the world.

Often half naked with all the imperfections they are brushed out to compare yourself to. If you want to have a happy family, well, you probably have Facebook friends that make their families, make it very clear their families are much happier than yours there with those pictures and the exotic holiday spots.

that they're at. Everywhere we turn, you see, we're confronted with others who seem to have it better than we do. It's very difficult not to feel inadequate.

But God says, by far, the most important thing in life, your relationship with him, being righteous, being in a right relationship with him, it has nothing to do with trying to measure up to some impossible ideal.

It simply involves the Bible's kind of belief, the Bible's trust, which is to recognize we are failures and that we're wholly dependent on the God who made us.

[32 : 07] God's plan to save us. We have fallen off the wall of the good life that God intended us to have.

So only God can save us. This covenant involving animals cut in two, broken in two, is the foundation of God's plan to save us.

but it's a plan that only climaxes in the brokenness of Jesus on the cross and in the blood of what the New Testament calls the new covenant, the blood of the new covenant that he shed for us.

Maybe you've been burdened by a feeling of personal inadequacy. maybe you've felt like you just can't measure up to expectations.

Why? You don't have to carry that anxiety. The Bible wants you to know the real freedom that's gained that comes by admitting that, in fact, inadequacy and failure are at the core of who you are.

[33 : 27] You are a failure. we are failures, but admitting that God in Jesus makes us adequate. So, Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord credited to him as righteousness.

Biblical faith is not an impressive halo-wearing faith, as far be it from me to have kind of faith. Rather, it's an impressive, or sorry, biblical faith is an admission of unimpressive inadequacy.

Let me say that again. It's an admission of unimpressive inadequacy, and it's trusting in God's adequacy. My final point is that biblical faith is not a silent faith, not a just shut up and believe it kind of faith.

did you notice the key verse here, verse 6, about Abraham's belief, is placed right in the middle of two incidents in which both Abraham is questioning God.

So, verse 6 then is the parade, it's a parade example of belief in the Bible. This is the first time belief occurs, but it's also, I think we should say, it's a parade example of belief that is less than perfect.

[35 : 01] That is, it doesn't, this kind of belief doesn't try to put a lid on all questioning and all complaint. As Christians, I think we can often give the impression that we know beyond a shadow of doubt.

I saw where non-believers said that one of the best descriptors for Christians was know-it-alls. We have a saying here, I don't know if you guys have it, God said it, I believe it, that settles it.

So, any questioning or any shred of doubt can be seen as the opposite of belief. I'm not saying that a lack of full trust is what God most wants from us.

Only that asking questions and respectful complaining to God is a normal part of what it means to believe. Take the book of Psalms, for example.

Psalms is God's prayer book for the church, and we often think of Psalms as mostly consisting of praise songs to God, but the book actually contains more lament songs than praise songs, and lament is just a fancy name for complaint songs.

[36 : 30] Wrestling to take God at his word and trusting in his provision for us, these things are part and parcel of having a genuine relationship with him.

One of my favorite New Testament passages is where the father of a boy that Jesus heals says, Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief, he says in the very next breath.

Such questioning of God, expressing doubt that he's handling our life in the best way, this is part of sincere faith. As one writer put complaint is based on taking God seriously.

Complaint is based on taking God seriously. So, what about you? Is there room in your relationship with God for questioning?

Are you real with him? Do you feel free to talk back to God? Or, do your prayer times mostly consist of you putting on your happy face before God?

[37 : 45] This is not the kind of relationship he wants from us. In fact, sometimes the way God relates to us, I think it almost seems to spur on questioning.

Look at Abraham here. Getting the promised land is not without big problems for him. You might just check out verses 19 to 21 there and all the names listed in those verses.

The land is chock-a-block full of other nations. To think Abraham is going to have this land, it almost invites doubt, doesn't it?

God knows that. And so, he's okay that Abraham does not show some kind of silent, just shut up and believe it. Unrealistic kind of faith.

Have a look at verse 13. Then the Lord said to him, Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated for hundred years.

[38 : 59] But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and after they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age.

In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure. So, there's a lot there, but 400 years of bad times for Abraham's descendants.

Did you get that? 400 years into the future, bad things are going to happen. This is baked into the deal for Abraham. Is such a promised future meant to close down discussion and complaint?

In 400 years, Abraham's going to be long dead. So, his belief, his faith here, clearly doesn't bring results like coins bring chocolate bars immediately from a vending machine.

Abraham believes in God's promises. He trusts in God's promises, even though fulfillment of those promises won't be until the far distant future.

[40 : 16] Belief, by definition, includes waiting, trusting in God's plan, even when it appears far off.

That's belief. Trusting in God's plan, even when it seems impossible. Abraham has been waiting, waiting for a son that God has promised.

And, spoiler alert here, it's going to be 25 years before God gives him Isaac. For Abraham and for us, God does bless us in amazing ways as we go from day to day.

But God's best promises are not to be realized until the far distant future. No more crying, new bodies, an end of suffering, a renewal of all God's good creation, heaven, and eternal life.

But godly are those who believe in these promises so deeply that God's delay in delivering them cuts us right to the bone. And we can't help but cry out in complaint, Lord, how long will you delay?

[41 : 40] As long as God's promises go unfulfilled, they're not just space for questioning and complaint. It will be part of what it means to believe.

Questioning and complaint will be part of what it means to have biblical faith. So, biblical faith is not silent, unquestioning, just shut up and believe it kind of faith.

It's a wrestling trust that he can and will meet our deepest needs. Biblical faith is a wrestling trust that he can and will meet our deepest needs.

our passage then claims the solution to Abraham's deepest anxieties is believing in God.

And we've exposed some myths that would tempt us to think that believing in God is really irrelevant, whether it's naive, simplistic, or even silly.

[42 : 48] Biblical faith is not blind pie-in-the-sky faith. Rather, it's a well-grounded trust in a God that's shown himself faith.

Biblical faith is not an impressive halo-wearing faith. It's an admission of our unimpressive inadequacy. And it's a trust in God's adequacy.

And biblical faith is not a silent, unquestioning faith, but a wrestling trust that God will do as he's promised. The common thread here is that God can be trusted.

In fact, we've just seen God reveals the future to Abraham 400 years ahead of time. And guess what? That's exactly what happens.

Especially in the face of the anxieties and the deep-seated inadequacies that so often weigh us down. This is a God. Do you see it?

[43 : 56] This is a God who has history itself under control. We need to know that he can be trusted.

And so let's conclude by praying and asking God to help us do this. Help us, God, not to think of belief in you as silly or somehow irrelevant.

Rather, help us to see it as the single most significant part of our lives. Lord, we acknowledge that we are unimpressive.

We are inadequate failures. We, Lord, have nothing to cling to but to cling to you. Help us, Lord, to let go of our own visions of what we want our lives to look like and to let go of our own desires to have everything in our lives under control.

Lord, may you alone be the object of our trust. May we cling to you. And may we cling to you alone. We pray this in Jesus' name.

[45 : 14] Amen.