

Unshakeable Faith

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The birth of Isaac is an example of God keeping His promises after a long time.

***10** For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. **11** And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. (Hebrews 11-NIV)*

Many people do not realize, even those getting married, that vows in weddings are really promises. Covenants. Perhaps you are familiar with traditional vows. I wonder if some of you used these at your wedding. A guy just got nudged by his wife, hey pay attention the preacher is talking about our wedding. And the guy leans over and says, "that is a good reason to go back to sleep."

Listen to these vows. Repeat them if you can remember them. These vows are set as polar opposites of one another. In the vows the bride and groom agree to make a life-long covenant, which is kept because of the giving of vows (promises) and rings.

The vows: "I, ____, take thee, ____, to be my wedded wife/husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for **better**, for **worse**, for **richer**, for **poorer**, in **sickness** and in **health**, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I pledge thee my faith."

This vow, covenant or promise announces, I will love you, until death we do part, regardless of the relational condition (for better or worse), economic condition (for richer or poorer), and the health condition (for sickness and health).

And many couples at Bethel have made these vows, or something like them in just the last few weeks. I often wonder if couples are really thinking,

...**worse** (that was the worst fight we have ever had),

...**poorer** (hurry get in the car, and drag that broken arm with you, we can't afford an ambulance),

...and **sickness** (the doctor said it is, "cancer")

Couples are thinking better, richer and have unlimited good health. The reason we make promises in the form of vows is because the future in this marriage will have **twists and turns**. There will be **detours** and **destructive decisions**. Just like Abraham and Sarah. And since I don't know what the future holds, I promise to stay with you and figure this out regardless of circumstances.

Regardless of the conflicts.

Regardless of the worse, poorer or sickness.

Like Abraham and Sarah, you may have to take-in a nephew because mom can't stay off drugs, and dad is dead beat. Abraham took in Lot.

...a spouse may want to move from the homeland, and it meets with resistance. Abraham wanted to go to Canaan, dad couldn't get past Haran.

...you may panic and make bad decision. A famine showed up in Canaan after Abraham and Sarai arrived and Abraham took a detour to Egypt.

...A husband may neglect a wife; a wife may neglect a husband. While in Egypt, the father of faith fears for his life and expects Sarah to cover for him. And this does not happen once, 25 years later Abraham asks Sarai to do the maritaly unfaithful thing again.

...You may live for years with unfilled dreams of having children or buying a home. Sarah could not bear children and Abraham wandered in the Promised Land without owning real estate.

...Your neighbors may be ungodly and make living in the neighborhood unenjoyable. Lot lives in Sodom and Gomorrah and gets kidnapped.

All of these obstacles and tests that Abraham and Sarah faced are descriptors applying to **for worse, for poorer** and **for sickness** as connected to our story of Unshakeable Faith for Abraham and Sarai.

So, you make a promise at the alter before witnesses, that no matter what happens we are going to stay together, get through this.

One of the first marital action-steps that Danice and I took was to white-out the word divorce from our dictionary. We have this agreement that if one of us wants to divorce the other, we get to kill them and tell God they died. Yea, he/she wanted a divorce.

Now, I am not insensitive to the marital hurt of those sitting here or listening online. And I know all too well the pain of divorce.

God can **carry you through** using redemption and lift and provide a wonderful God-designed destiny in spite of divorce.

I love the song, *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*, with words by Thomas Chisholm (1866-1960) and music composed by William Runyan 1870-1957.

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father
There is no shadow of turning with Thee
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be.

The inspiration to the song is from *Lamentations 3:22-23, Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. ²³ They are new every morning; great is your **faithfulness**.* Faithfulness is simply keeping a promise for a long time. And God does that with his promises.

When all human means were exhausted and the father and mother of faith had made about as many destructive decisions and took as many detours as possible, **God did the impossible**. And this message of God doing the impossible was explained to Jesus followers over and over. ²⁶ *Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."* (Matt 19:26-NIV)

So, let me summarize some practical insights about detours that seem to last way too long. Often God takes a long time to fulfill a promise. The two top responses to the poll we took a couple weeks ago, asking the question: what obstacles keep you from Unshakeable Faith?

Response 1, can I blow it and miss God's destiny. Response 2, why does God take so long?

If you attempt to manipulate the situation you will transfer your trust from God to self.

God is never in a hurry to fulfill his promises.

God does not unroll and unfurl his eternal plans based on clocks or calendars. If you want to see God's promises fulfilled in your life, you have to learn to submit to God's prepackaged and custom-made timetable.

Stay clear of destructive decisions. And stay away from detours, unless they are orchestrated by God, for a divine purpose. On 2 different occasions, Abram made destructive decisions to go to Egypt about 25 years apart. Even while you are making destructive decisions, or taking a detour in God's destiny, **God's promises can still be fulfilled.**

Listen carefully. If God makes a promise, he will fulfill it. It will be done. And it often takes a **But God**, intervention to full this off. The bible is filled with examples of God's intervention,

But God, in spite of our mishaps and misbehavior.

*²⁰ You intended to harm me, **but God** intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. (Gen 50-NIV)*

But God, in spite of our misadventures or misinterpretations.

But God, in spite of miscues and misconduct.

*My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever. (Gen 73:26-NIV)*

Do not live in fear that somehow you have hindered or wrecked God's plan. You are not that powerful. And you are certainly not that important to hinder God's plan. Your plan is not just for you, it impacts so many others. Your life is like a jigsaw puzzle, it carefully fits with others jigsaw pieces.

God is bigger than your shortcomings. Bigger than your sins. Keep this in mind. Never forget. Be encouraged!

God never loses track of a promise He has made.

Now, this would be a good time, to give you some biblical instructions on how God's promises work. There are thousands of promises in the bible. Some are universal. Some are personal. Some are conditional. Now, you have to understand how to distinguish between these three.

What? Yes, I would guess some of you are frustrated about what God is doing because you are perhaps misinformed about how God's promises work.

The best way to say it is, (1) not all of God's promises are for all people, and (2) not all of God's promises will be fulfilled in your lifetime. If you use the following biblical insights, you will understand how God's promises work and which ones are for you.

Let me remind you, this is not an insignificant topic to feature-God's promises. God's promises take up a significant portion of God's word. There are over 7000 promises in the Bible.

Let's ask 3 questions and then take each one, one at a time.

Is the promise universal in application? (John 3:16; Romans 10:13)

Is the promise conditional? (Luke 9:23, James 4:10; 1 John 1:9)

Is the promise personal in nature? (Acts 16:31; Acts 18:10)

By the way, this is so important, we often refer to the land given to Abraham, The Promised Land. And God would give the promise of a Promised Land, as an unconditional covenant. It is not based on Israel's performance; it is based on God's promise.

¹⁵ All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you." (Gen 13-NIV)

The Promised Land is about the size of New Jersey.

Is The Promise Universal?

The first question we look at is the promise universal? Is the promise universal in application? If it is universal in nature, it will contain words like WHOEVER, EVREYONE, WHOSOEVER and ANYONE. These words will be included in the biblical text. Here are a couple examples.

The most famous universal promise is John 3:16, ¹⁶ *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that **whoever** believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John. 3:16-NIV)*

...whoever believes in Him should not perish.

Many often expect an angry filled God that punishes the world...but instead God loves the world. Another universal promise.

¹³ *For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Rom 10:13-NET)*

Now, these universal promises are held out to everyone, anytime and in anyplace-if you follow the advice or even condition.

Is The Promise Conditional?

The next promise has a **universal invitation** but also a **condition** that must be met.

²³ *Then he said to them all: **Whoever** wants to be my disciple **must** deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. (Luke 9:23-NIV)*

Some promises are dependent on a personal action step. That is, if you fulfill the condition, the promise will follow. Who would like to experience the presence of God, at regular intervals in your life? Obviously, if you are a follower of Jesus, you want that. And you need that when (not if) you are tempted, tormented, tested. Ok, here is how to access God's presence. Meet the condition and experience the Christ. Meet the requirement and experience the redemption.

¹⁰ *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. (James 4:10-NIV)*

Another verse that shows you that a conditional promise requires the claimer of the promise to meet the condition first.

⁹ *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9-NIV)*

See how confession of sin secures God's forgiveness. I would say that often we are really bad at the confession part. We do more drive-by confession than real heart-felt confession.

What do you mean pastor? And by the way, if it is a real confession, it opens the door to repentance. And true repentance opens the door to restoration. Here are the elements you should include in your confession to God and others. There are 7 of them. I call them the 7 A's of confession. Why? Because each component starts with the letter A.

If you want to pick up a card at the end of church, that include these elements, it will be here at the altar.

Is The Promise Personal In Nature

There are promises in the bible that teach how God operates, provides encouragement but, the promise may not be for you. Here is where many make the most mistakes about God's promises.

A specific promise given to a person in the bible may not be for you. Paul preaches to the jailer holding him, after a violent earthquake shook the foundations of the prison and the jailers asks, "what must I do to be saved? Verse 31 is the answer.

³¹ They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." (Acts 16:31-NIV)

The promise does tell us that when a family member gets saved, Christ comes into the home and can be available for others. But salvation must be decided for by each person.

A few chapters later Paul is in Corinth, there are many Jews who opposed Paul, so he became fearful. Paul was about to pull up tent stakes and leave town, even though many Corinthians were being saved and baptized. Paul got a word of encouragement through a vision and stayed for a year and a half.

"Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. ¹⁰ For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."

It is tempting to want to claim the comfort and word from God intended for someone else's circumstances. But, claiming promises intended for someone else, only leaves your heart broken. As we have seen early in the study of Unshakeable Faith God made a specific promise to Abraham-you will have a son.

¹¹ And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. (Hebrews 11-NIV)

Now, it has been **25 years since Abraham left Haran and as we have seen it is time for** the promise to be fulfilled. Here are 3 insights that will provide comfort and correction as live in God's promises.

When God's promises are fulfilled, past mistakes can still carry lingering consequences.

Do you remember Sarah's suggestion to gullible Abraham to have a child with Hagar? It has been a long time since Sarah offered that shaky and sloppy advice. And it will be the child born of the rebellion who reminds Abraham and Sarah of the unfortunate choice that was made.

Ishmael has been a sore spot between Abraham and Sarah for now over 14 years. Then Isaac arrives and joy fills the home, even while Ishmael is now a teenager with all his teenager attitudes.

Let's read about a special day for Isaac that Ishmael hijacks with a bad attitude.

⁸ The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. ⁹ But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, ¹⁰ and she said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." (Gen 21-NIV)

The festive occasion is disrupted when the older brother attempts to power up on the younger. Ishmael sees Isaac as a rival, and mom comes to her son's defense. One day Sarah reaches the boiling point because of the sibling rivalry going on. So, she makes a protective and painful announcement to Abraham.

¹⁰ and she said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." ¹¹ The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. ¹² But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring^[b] will be reckoned. ¹³ I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring." Gen 21-NIV

Truth to Learn: When you face a difficult situation, don't focus on getting out of them, focus on "what to get out of them."

When God's promises are fulfilled, God may still ask for more.

Abraham has experienced many tests prior to Gen 22. None will compare to the one he is about to experience. God's word is clear, this will be the greatest of all tests. All of us have times in our lives when your future seems to balance on a single decision.

² Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love — Isaac — and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." (Genesis 22-NIV)

Will Abraham do what God has spoken or act as if God had not spoken. Notice God tests Abraham after his heart is affectionately intertwined with his son. Take your son whom you love...

Nothing could be more difficult than the request connected with the heir of a promise Abraham has waited to experience all of his life.

God did this so all of mankind would learn that a mortal and flawed man could love God to such a degree and length that he would lay his son on an altar for sacrifice to the Almighty. **Look closely at the qualities of the decision.**

It was immediate. *Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. (Gen 22:3)*

It was based on faith. *Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and come back to you. (Gen 22:5-NIV)*

It was 100% sacrificial. *Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. (Gen 22:10-NIV)*

Isaac too has a strong faith. A trusting faith. In no place do we see him struggling with his father. He too trusted and surrendered. What a father-son example. A pre-incarnation of a Christ-Father example we see in the New Testament.

Truth to Learn: It takes time for spiritual maturity to flourish and flower. Feeling like you flounder too much; it is not the end-of-the-story!

When God's promises are fulfilled, your past mistakes may carry on for generations.

In a world of cosmetic makeovers and airbrushed photographs and expensive plastic surgery to see God's word, **put on the real** is refreshing. The bible gives unimproved and untouched up portraits of imperfect biographies of those who walked with God and those who failed God. Who wants to read about abstract and theoretical perfection that is unattainable? Now, give me the story of a misfit teenager, a misguided father and a misunderstood mother any day.

Now there was a famine in the land — besides the previous famine in Abraham's time — *and Isaac went to Abimelek king of the Philistines in Gerar. (Genesis 26:1-NIV)*

When the men of that place asked him about his wife, he said, "she is my sister." (vs 7)

In spite of making a generational sin, God still blessed Isaac just as he promised Abraham.¹² *Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold, because the Lord blessed him. (Genesis 26-NIV)*

So, God has been using every opportunity to show us, that Abraham and Sarah still pleased God and were blessed even with all of the twists and turns.

All of the detours and destructive decisions. They still got to their destiny.

God's promises are based on faithfulness, and they remind us that your best days are ahead of you. You might be unproven, but you are not unpromised. God gave real estate to Abraham, to show each of us we can have a real state of confidence that we are blessed in spite of detours and destructive decisions. Your promised land awaits!

In the Promised land, God's promises outweigh your problems.

In the Promised Land, God's promises outlive your pitfalls.

In the Promised Land, God's promises outargue your prosecutor.

In the Promised Land, God's promises outperform your pain.

In the Promised Land, God's promises outlast your predicament.

So, I want to end by giving you some of the promises that await you. There are 6996 more promises awaiting your discovery. Awaiting your destiny!

God will **fight** for you-it was the Lord God who fought for you (Josh 23:3)

³ You yourselves have seen everything the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the Lord your God who fought for you.

God wants to **prosper** you - *plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future (Jer. 29:11-NIV)*

¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

God will **heal** you- And by His stripes we are healed (Is 53:5-NKJV)

*But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.*

God will **give** you his power- *the God of Israel gives power and strength to his people. Praise be to God (Psalm 68:35).*

You, God, are awesome in your sanctuary;
the God of Israel gives power and strength to his people.

Praise be to God!