

“Pinky Promise”*Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16, Romans 4:13-25*

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How many of you have ever made a promise? Okay, for those of you who don't know, even in my Kid's Min videos I expect participation. Just last week they had to hold something frozen above their heads while standing on one foot for the entire lesson. So, let's try this again, hands up if you have ever made a promise? That's better. We've all made promises big or small, but sometimes we make those promises lightly. And there are times when we've been a victim of a broken promise. These days it seems that promises are not created equal. There are those promises that people don't intend to keep. You know the one I'm talking about, when you bump into someone you haven't seen in a while and they say, we'll do lunch someday, and that day never comes. There are the casual promises that are made, like when we make plans with someone and we're too tired or even worse, they do something to make us angry, causing us to renege on that promise altogether. There are strong promises like our marriage vows -it will be 20 years ago this June that Chris and I made a promise to be faithful to one another. And then, of course, there is the gold standard of all promises - the pinky promise.

Promises are considered to be a measure of one's worth. We have heard it said many times before 'this person is as good as their word.' And yet it can be hard to keep them. When we break our promises because of illness or inclement weather, these are considered to be valid reasons. But, when our emotions or feelings get in the way, it can hurt our relationships. Author Frank Sonnenberg reminds us that, "trust is built through a series of experiences shared with others. When behaviour is consistent, faith in the relationship develops. When promises are broken or people are misled, the bonds of trust are breached."

Are we building trust through our promises?

In Genesis 12:1-3, Abraham receives three promises from God.

1. The first was the promise of land. In verse 1, we read God's call to Abraham, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you."
2. The second was the promise of descendants. God declares in verse 2, "I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others."
3. And the third promise is one of blessing and redemption. Verse 3, God tells him, "I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you."

Abraham, originally Abram before God gave him his new name which means 'father to many', not only showed faith in God's promises, but his faithfulness also withstood the

tests that were put before him. He put his trust in God when he departed his secure and familiar surroundings to travel to a new land he knew nothing about; he circumcised himself and his family, and he was even willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, because of his trust in God's promise. It's no wonder that Paul is using Abraham as a model of faith.

But faith is not always so easy. Paul would have us believe that Abraham's faith was unwavering. Maybe Paul was having a senior's moment, perhaps Abraham's setbacks momentarily slipped Paul's mind. We do read how Abraham struggled from time to time. God did call Abraham to go to a new land and promised him descendants when he was around 75 years old. And yes, even at 75 years of age, Abraham believed that God would deliver on that promise. But at 86 years old, and still childless, Abraham protests, – 'Oh come on Lord, keep this up and the son of my slave will be my heir.' God reassures him, "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have." (Gen 15:5) And Abraham once again remained faithful. But here's where things go awry, his wife Sarah (originally Sarai), not having been able to conceive, convinces Abraham to sleep with her maid Hagar; Abraham agrees and that's when we meet Ishmael.

Now, I know what you're thinking, that wasn't Abraham's fault, no. Sarah made him to do it! That's right blame it on the woman; it's always the woman's fault, isn't that right Eve. This isn't to say that Abraham lost his faith in God and we should not hold him up as an example of faithfulness, it's just that - Abraham was human, like us. And just like us, he was not perfect. Just like us he had moments where he struggled with his faith; moments when he got tired of waiting, moments when he thought that he needed to do something in order for God to fulfil his promise.

Who could blame him? How many times have we heard the phrase, 'if it's too good to be true, then it probably is?' How many times have we said the words, 'nothing in life is free?' We believe that in order for us to receive something, we need to earn it. In our performance-based society, where regardless of what age we are, there is always some sort of competition, award, or promotion to be won. We tend to measure ourselves by our accomplishments at work. We live in a society where it is no longer acceptable for children to only do well academically. They must now excel in sports, music and in their social lives. Our achievements have now become our identities. We start to believe that the more we perform the more rewards we will receive.

This performance-based thinking can creep into our spiritual lives as well. Some people think that faith is obeying a set of church rules, showing up (or in our current situation), tuning in every Sunday for worship; or keeping 'busy' for the Lord. That somehow, if we follow the prescribed set of rules, and putter about, then God will take notice and reward us. When approached with something that we can't handle or fix, we pray harder than we have ever prayed before. And when that prayer isn't answered after what we perceive is an appropriate amount of time, we can sometimes find ourselves bargaining with God. 'Lord, if you answer my prayer, I will do this for you.' So now, not only are we willing to perform for God, we are asking God to perform for us.

Paul tells us in Romans 4:13, “Clearly, God’s promise to give the whole earth to Abraham and his descendants was based not on his obedience to God’s law, but on a right relationship with God that comes by faith.” Abraham’s righteousness was made possible through the Grace of God, not because of his performance. Abraham could not obey the law because it would be some 430 years before the law would be given to Moses. Abraham received his promise through faith. So, when at 99 years old, when God once again reaffirms his promise, did Abraham think to himself Yes! Finally! I have done all that I needed to do and I will have a son! No, Abraham laughs! ‘You’ve got to be kidding me Lord. I’ll be 100 years old when this kid is born. How on earth will I father a child.’ And guess what, Sarah is caught laughing too. How can God expect Sarah and Abraham to have a baby with those dead bodies of theirs?

Verse 17 tells us that, “Abraham believed in the God who brings the dead back to life and creates new things out of nothing.” Abraham believed that the One who created light out of darkness, the One who created the heavens and the earth out of nothing, is the same God who could create life in Sarah’s 90-year-old womb. Abraham wrestled with his faith from time to time, but he continued to believe even though the situation seemed hopeless. He could believe because his hope was based not on his own strength, but rather on the One who made the promise - God. And yes, even though Abraham had some setbacks every now and then, God, with his grace, continued to work with him, allowing Abraham’s faith to remain constant. God didn’t abandon Abraham in his old age. He fulfilled his promise by giving him a son, Isaac, not because of what Abraham did, but because of his faith. Even though Abraham didn’t get to see all the promises fulfilled, he believed that God would fulfill them. And that is exactly what God did!

The fact that Abraham didn’t have a law to follow or that he struggled with his faith did not matter to God. He was made right by God through his faithfulness. Romans 4:5 tells us, “People are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners.” I once read that “our faith does not save us, but simply permits us to access the gift of saving grace.” Grace is a free gift. Grace saves us. Just like Abraham, we don’t have to perform to earn it, we just have to believe and accept this gift that was freely given to us. But free gifts always have some sort of catch, don’t they?

Paul tells us in verses 23-24, “And when God counted him as righteous, it wasn’t just for Abraham’s benefit. It was recorded for our benefit, too, assuring us that God will also count us as righteous if we believe in him, the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.” The promise was not just for Abraham, it is our promise too. There’s no catch. We don’t have to earn it we just have to accept it. That’s it! As we receive the gift of grace, we can fully put our trust in God just like Abraham did. We need not worry about tomorrow or try to make things happen. God promised us an everlasting life, a promise that was fulfilled through Christ Jesus, who was handed over for our sins, and raised back to life. This is the promise, and this is the hope, even when things can feel hopeless.

Allen Dwight Callahan is a Baptist Minister and Author of *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*. He explains that the harsh realities of slavery “drove many to look for meaning and hope in a new place. When slaves encountered these stories (in the Bible) they made the stories their own through music... And so, stories of the Bible were communicated, then were remembered in a kind of musical shorthand.” Hence, the biblical references and biblical images that we hear in the spirituals. Music helped the slaves not only to connect with their countrymen and families, but these spirituals also helped them to connect to the hope in God’s promise. Through the generations, their spiritual hymns remained, giving hope to others that one day they too will be free.

We too can be free if we accept and believe in the promise of our God. In our broken world, God, through his grace creates a new relationship in us. Although we may have our occasional doubts, we are encouraged knowing that God continuously and patiently works within us. We see evidence of His faithfulness throughout the Bible. His faithfulness enables us to develop our relationship and trust in Him. His promises will not be broken; He does not make them lightly, for God is always true to His word. Pinky Promise.

Believe and accept the promised word of God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.