

Romans: The Promise Realized Through Faith

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[0 : 00] Hi. You can all hear me? Great. My name's Alistair. If I haven't met you before, I'm one of the pastors here at Watermark.

And I especially look after the university ministry that we run out of Hong Kong University. So hello to all you students out there. It's an international Christian fellowship that we run for international students who come from all over the world to Hong Kong, to the university there.

And we meet as a Christian fellowship to encourage one another. My relative recently bought an iPhone through a service in the U.S. known as Craigslist.

And when she bought it, she kind of paid the money and received the phone by mail and then opened it up, tried to use it, only to find that it seemed to be locked.

And nothing that she could do could unlock this phone. And so she tried to ask friends. She tried to ask the Apple store.

[1 : 14] And they said that she had to go and find something called the activation lock ID from the owner of the phone. And when she emailed the seller to ask for it, they told her to get lost in not so many words.

She had bought a stolen phone. And there's something that Apple does now for phones, like I think iPhone 4S and later, that is called activation lock, where they will lock the phone remotely from their server so that you cannot use it as a phone until the original person who has the ID locked to that phone puts their ID password in.

And so a stolen phone is basically a brick or a doorstop and cannot be used. She trusted in the wrong thing, in the wrong person.

She felt that this seller, whoever it was, was a reputable person. But instead, she was sold a stolen phone, which was unable to be used.

I don't know if you're thinking of buying a phone. Maybe some of you are. And of course, here in Hong Kong, there's maybe a couple of different ways in which you could do that.

[2 : 35] I see that on the streets, there's always somebody selling an iPhone of some description just with a whole batch of them, a whole box of them.

And maybe they can offer you a discount. Maybe it comes from Shenzhen. I don't know where it comes from. But you could do that, or you could go to the Apple Store and buy it from there.

Who would you trust? We're going to be talking about trust this morning because the passage that we read out before talks about faith, specifically the faith of Abraham, but also faith more generally.

And so today, I'm going to talk about three things, three questions that this passage raises for us.

The first one is, what is faith? What is faith? And what is not faith?

The second question is, well then, who should we trust? Who should we have faith in? What kind of person would be worthy of having our faith?

[3 : 43] And the third question I'm going to look at is, how do we strengthen our faith? How do we strengthen our faith? Okay, so first of all, what is faith?

What is faith after all? And I'm going to say that faith is, faith is not like a fluffy bunny, but instead we should have faith a little bit more like an astronaut.

I'm going to explain that. Okay, this is what faith is not. Faith is not what our world, our society normally thinks that faith is, which is a kind of a wishful thinking, a vague hope, a fuzzy feeling.

It's like a fluffy bunny version of faith, because a fluffy bunny is cute, it's comforting, it's nice, but it can't really help you. It can't really do anything for you if you are in trouble.

If you leave your keys locked inside the house and your bunny is in there, then it can't get them for you. It can't help you. Our world thinks that faith means something like this definition that I read, to accept or believe something on the basis of little or no evidence.

[5 : 03] For example, to take something on faith. Please try to believe what I'm telling you. Just take it on faith. It's the kind of faith that is blind, the kind of faith that doesn't care about evidence or reality.

How different a picture of faith we see in the Bible when we see that Jesus and the apostles continue to exhort those listening to believe on the basis of the evidence that's presented. Whether it's the miracles that people saw Jesus do with their very own eyes, or the witness of the apostles who saw Jesus die and then rise again with their very own eyes. That's the evidence that's presented. John calls it, what our eyes have seen and what our hands have touched. This is what we declare to you. A better modern word to describe what faith is, I think, would be reliance.

Reliance. Faith is relying on somebody or something. The Apollo 13 mission in 1970 went to the moon, or was scheduled to go to the moon, and it was aborted when an oxygen tank exploded and vented all of the oxygen in that part of the spacecraft out into space.

[6 : 35] And so, with the main section damaged, the astronauts had to trust the ground crew and the engineers that they were there, that they were doing all the correct calculations needed to bring them home.

And at the same time, the crew had to trust what the astronauts were reporting, that they would keep calm and continue to work, knowing that one mistake, and they would never be coming home again.

The astronauts had faith in their instruments, as well as in the engineers and the ground crew back home.

And this faith that they had wasn't a wishful thinking, a vague hope kind of faith. No, their faith in the engineering crew was complete. In fact, they trusted them with their lives.

Sometimes we spiritualize faith. But, and when we spiritualize faith, we think that it means that we don't have to act or do anything.

[7 : 41] And that God does the acting for us. But actually, God has given us lives to live. Hands that work and brains and minds that think and to make decisions.

And often what we want is life to be easy and for God to make the decision for us so that I don't have to choose. But what God wants is for us to make decisions in line with faith.

Us to make decisions in accordance with His will. The astronauts had faith in ground control and what they did with that faith was they didn't just kind of sit back and expect the shuttlecraft to take them back by themselves, by itself.

No, they listened. They took that faith and they put it into action by listening to what was said and then acting on it. And we'll see that Abraham has the same kind of faith.

He does the same thing. But now we're in a better position, I think, to understand why Paul writes in Romans 4, verse 13, for the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through law but through the righteousness of faith.

[9 : 02] And then in verse 16, he writes, this is why it depends on faith in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring. Did you hear that?

Well, the reason why it, the promise, depends on faith is in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring.

A guarantee is a promise with certainty. In our world, it's often something that's written out. In Australia, where I come from, the, the, the, housing situation, I know it's, it's bad talking about housing situation for you guys here in Hong Kong is the same as well but the housing situation is so bad in Australia that most people cannot afford, most young people cannot afford to buy their own house and so they don't, they don't even earn enough to get a loan big enough to get their first place, their first property and so what is a common practice is that the parents will guarantee the loan and so enable their children to be able to borrow more than they would otherwise be able to to be able to pay off the loan and that guarantee has the written force of law.

As they write it, as the parents write that down, a guarantee for their children, they are guaranteeing to pay if their children cannot and the bank takes that and trust them because they have assets that can be sold and all that kind of thing.

So that's what a guarantee is. It's something that is, it's a promise that is made certain. So can faith really provide that kind of guarantee?

[10:56] if we think of faith as believing something with little or no evidence or something that we just kind of take on as faith, then no, because that kind of faith doesn't guarantee anything.

That's the wishful thinking, fluffy bunny kind of faith. The reason, though, the reason why faith is able to guarantee the promise to us is precisely because it doesn't rely on us.

You see, that kind of wishful thinking faith relies on you as a person. Your faith and what you think or what you hope or what you wish would happen.

The faith the Bible is talking about is a faith on something external. faith on something that is bigger than you.

If faith rested upon us, then no, it wouldn't be a guarantee of anything. But in the Bible, faith rests upon God and God is the guarantor of the promise.

[12:10] Think again about the astronauts. They had to trust ground control. If they wanted to get home, then they were told that they had to fire the engines at an exact point in time for exactly four minutes and 24 seconds.

Not one second more, not one second less. And they took that advice and they put it into action. And they fired the engines for that amount of time and it was so accurate, they only needed two minor adjustments afterwards to be able to make it home safely.

let me tell you a secret about faith. Faith is only as strong as its object. Or faith receives its strength from the strength of its object.

That is, you can have a great faith in something that could let you down because it's inherently untrustworthy. in Australia just like in Hong Kong many people read the horoscopes and consult them week after week.

Maybe like two-thirds of people read them and consult them. And they have great faith in them. And they might even live their lives by them. But does it make any difference to them?

[13:30] Or does it help them in any way? having faith in a promise is about trusting someone's word. So that leads us to the second question that I asked.

Who should we trust? What kind of a person is worthy of our faith? If having faith in a promise is about trusting someone's word, then we know if someone's word is trustworthy based on their character.

What did the astronauts have to do? They had to trust the word, the calculations, the instructions that they were given from ground control. And why did they trust them?

Well, because they knew them. They knew their character. They knew the training that they'd had with them. And they knew their track record as well. They knew that they weren't the first people to go to the moon and come back safely.

And so they trusted the information they were given. The kind person who can be trusted to keep his promise or her promise is someone who makes worthy promises carefully, deliberately, and then keeps them, even at great personal cost.

[14:47] Robertson McQuilken served as the president of Columbia Bible College. And he was a successful speaker and writer and was in the heights of his career as the president.

And when he discovered that his wife, Muriel, was in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, then he took on more and more of Muriel's care as she felt secure only with him until he ended up resigning from his position, walking away from his power, prestige, his ministry, his wealth, and became a full-time carrier for her.

And he says, he talks about this decision, and he says, this decision was made, in a way, 42 years ago, when I promised to care for Muriel in sickness and in health, till death do us part.

So, as a matter of my word, integrity has something to do with it. But so does fairness. She has cared for me fully and sacrificially all these years. If I cared for her for the next 40 years, I would not be out of her debt.

Duty can be grim and stoic, but there's more. I love Muriel. She is a delight to me. I don't have to care for her. I get to. It is a high honor to care for so wonderful a person.

[16:06] Robertson McCorken is someone who takes his promise to his wife to the utmost seriousness. He promised to love her for better or for worse, in sickness and in health. And he didn't do it grudgingly, but joyfully, even at great personal cost.

It's a man who keeps his word. Does God keep his promise to us, even at great personal cost? He did.

as he saw and looked and saw a world that was lost, without God, without hope, without love, he comes to Abraham and makes a promise to him to bless the world through him.

And in order to keep that promise to Abraham, to bring blessing to the world through Abraham's line, his own son was born into that line, born to die for the children of earth so that a new people might be born, the people of the promise.

In the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus was, the night before he was betrayed, Gethsemane tells us that it was of great personal cost to God.

[17 : 33] The eternal relationship between father and son was about to be ripped apart in a way that even Jesus feared. And so he prayed to the father to take this cup from him, the cup of suffering, to take it away.

But because God was committed to keeping that promise, he continued with the plan. Because Jesus was committed to keeping that promise, he went to the cross, carrying our unrighteousness so that we might be made righteous.

This is what the Bible calls grace. That God would make and keep his promise to us and rescue us from our sins at great personal cost.

And so we learn something of the character of God here. This is the kind of God who keeps his promises. promises. And this is why faith in God is the guarantee of that promise.

Because God guarantees his promise. God is our guarantee. I said before, the reason why faith is able to guarantee the promise to us is precisely because it does not rely on us.

[18 : 53] And so we don't rely on ourselves. In fact, that is what Paul has been talking about for the first three chapters of the book of Romans. Those who rely on themselves, on their own good works, on their law keeping, they are the ones who are headed for disaster.

The law of Moses cannot guarantee the way to God. That's the way that the Jews were following.

The way of Islam, too, which teaches that a Muslim must do certain works, the five pillars, to gain as much blessings as possible, to be acceptable for God, cannot guarantee the way.

Because it's all dependent on whether you do the works. And if your heart isn't right, you won't make it. Following our, having faith in our own, our own talents and gifts, well, that's the way of our society as well, which teaches us that to truly succeed in society today, we must work and achieve greatness by our gifts, our talents, and our efforts.

What do you rely on? Who do you rely on? In your day-to-day walk, do you rely on your abilities, your gifts, your strengths?

Christianity says that if righteousness had to come through adherence to the law, then no one would be saved, because through the law came judgment and condemnation.

[20 : 35] The promise instead comes through grace, guaranteed because it doesn't rely on us. If it did rely on us, then we are unreliable.

Our good works are unreliable. Our hearts are unreliable. We know that even within ourselves. So don't trust in yourself, in your efforts and your works.

If you do trust in yourself, in your own goodness, to get right with God, then God will judge you according to your goodness, and he will judge it against his holiness. But if you have faith in Jesus, then he stands in front of you.

His righteous life covers you. And God, whose standard of holiness is perfection, is satisfied with his righteousness, with his sacrifice.

If you have faith in Jesus, then you're included in it. You're included in his righteousness.

righteousness. And so I hope that what I've been saying will help you to understand that faith is a reliance on something that is much bigger than us.

[21 : 54] In fact, we don't even rely on faith. We rely on God. That's what faith is. Who would you rather have faith in? A street seller who might sell you a stolen phone?

or someone who actually works at the Apple store? Do you have faith in your own ability to be good enough for God?

I tell you, I don't. But I do have faith that God will keep his promise, the promise that he's guaranteed. He will fulfill it and bring me safely to him.

Let's get to my third question. how do we get a stronger faith? Don Carson tells this story of a boat that is ready to cross this river to get to the other side.

There's two men, they're journeying, and they want to get to the inn, which is on the other side of the river. They get to the boat, and one of them says, we're heading up.

[23 : 04] It's a stormy night, and it's windy, and the storm's buffeting, but the guy says, don't worry, I know this guy, he's going to have a boat ready for us. He's done this many times before, and we'll be able to get across safely.

And so they get there, and when they see it, they see this boat tied to the jetty there, and it's being rocked about by all the waves, the wind, and everything.

And the other guy says, are you sure? Like, I'm a little scared, actually. Will we actually make it across if we jump on this boat?

And the guy says, no, no, look, don't worry, don't worry. This guy, he's an expert boat builder. His boat has survived many storms, and it will survive this one as well. And the second guy says, well, okay, I really don't know about this, but we don't have any choice, let's go.

So then they both get on the boat, and the boat makes it safely to the other side, through the storm, and they both get off. Now, Don Carson asks a question at this point. He says, which man had the stronger faith?

[24 : 10] And it's clear. It was the first man who knew the owner of the boat and was confident in the boat, and he got on without a worry. The other guy was scared, he wasn't sure, and so on. And then Don asks a second question.

Which man made it across to the other side? Well, it was the ones who got in the boat, both of them. Because what saved them was not the quality or the strength of their faith.

What saved them was the quality and workmanship of the boat, which enabled them to get to the other side. That's how it is with us and faith and God.

God. It's not the quality and the strength of faith that I might have that enables me to do wonderful things. It is the God that we serve, the God who came and died for us, the God whose character is revealed to us.

It's because of him and his character and his glory that we can get to the other side. So then, how is it that one man had stronger faith?

[25 : 20] Well, he knew the boatmaker better. How did Abraham strengthen his faith? We read the answer in verse 20, hang on, where are we?

Verse 19 and 20. See, verse 19 says, he didn't weaken in faith when he considered his circumstances, his own body, his wife, his aged wife.

But instead, he grew strong in his faith, verse 20, as he gave glory to God. In other words, he grew strong in his faith as he knew God better and better and gave the glory to him.

What it meant for Abraham to grow strong in his faith was to learn to trust and rely and to see that God was one who kept his promises. God promised to bless Abraham, to look after him, to give him land, nation, and people.

And Abraham watched those promises come true one by one. And as he did, he kept walking in that way, walking in those footsteps to continue to trust, in God.

[26 : 46] And that's why his faith grew stronger over time. Abraham kept exercising the faith muscle.

He kept having faith. And in all those years, you know, Abraham waited a really long time. I don't know how long you think you've waited for a prayer. prayer. But it was 25 years between when God told Abraham that he would have many children and when he actually had the son of the promise, Isaac.

back. And in all those years, Abraham was walking faithfully, in step with God. And it would have been hard for him to have faith.

And yet, by exercising that faith muscle, Abraham's faith grew and then kept growing. And then he saw that God was faithful and he grew again.

We grow in faith when we go through trials. When do you find it the most difficult to have faith? For me, I think I find it the hardest when I feel disappointed by life.

[28 : 02] And by extension, disappointed in God as well. Because he didn't give me the life that I wanted. And we grow in our faith when we go through trials.

And in my story, when life wasn't going well, when I'd land in... To understand something about how Sydney works, it's a big place.

It's four times the size of Hong Kong by land mass. Ten times if you count in the mountains, regions and so on. So it's like several cities at once. And so when I was posted in different places, what I didn't realise was that it was like moving to another city.

And I didn't realise that it would mean that I'd be cut off from all of my friends and connections and so on. And so when I was in a place, isolated, alone, unsupported, feeling only kind of the difficulty of working in a new environment and I'd been told quite often that when you go into work in ministry, that persecution will come.

It's just that you don't expect it to come from within the church. So when that all happened, then I became convinced that I was abandoned by my friends, the diocese that I was a part of, even by God.

[29 : 32] And I found it nearly impossible to pray, except for just this one prayer. God, get me out of here. And so, you know, I fell into this deep, dark depression and when life is not going well, you ask God, what are you doing?

Like the psalmist, I cried out, how long, O Lord? And in that moment, your faith is shaken. You aren't sure whether God loves you. You aren't sure whether He even remembers you.

And a friend asked me at that time, what do you think God is teaching you through this time? Apart from wanting to punch Him in the nose, I couldn't think of a possible reason.

That's the whole point why I was feeling that way. I couldn't think of a possible reason for God to put me through that situation. That might be your situation. How would Abraham have felt in the long years while he waited for God to fulfill his promise?

Five years, ten years, fifteen years, twenty years. You know, God only spoke to Abraham three times in those years, including his initial call. And the fourth time was after twenty-four years when he told him, finally, this is when it's going to happen.

[30 : 46] the key is to see your life as an interconnected whole that God cares about.

The key is to understand and to remember God's character, who He is and what He's done and the promise that He makes and that He keeps. Paul Miller, in a book, He talks about how to see your life as an interconnected whole and how you deal with disappointment.

And he's faced that because he had a disabled daughter and it's a 25-year journey for him as well with her. And he says this, first of all, don't demand that the story goes your way.

Secondly, look for the storyteller in your story. And thirdly, stay in the story. Don't shut down when it goes the wrong way.

What he's saying is, for him, when he grappled with having a disabled daughter, first of all, he felt kind of anger and denial that this was really happening. And then, he tried to do everything that he could in his power to fix her, to help her recover, to do all these, to do what he could.

[32 : 09] And then, when that failed, because he'd been relying on himself, he fell into despair. It was only after many years, as he and his wife continued to pray, continued to trust God, they began to see answers to their prayers, not in, not in a miraculous kind of healing, but in little steps, being able to talk, being able to function, and so on.

But also, in the growth that they personally experienced, of seeing their daughter grow and develop, slowly. And they said that she's taught her more than having kind of a normal family could ever have.

The normal family just got completely kind of trashed and ruined, so they say. But it enabled them to trust and to lean on God and to stop believing that they were the saviors of their own lives.

I think something similar has happened in my life. I still don't know what God was doing, putting me through that situation. But one thing that's different is I want to find out.

I'm excited to find out, to see what God has in store for me as I think about my life, not just in compartments that are disconnected to one another, but as a whole kind of life story that God is weaving through my life.

[33 : 40] So for you, consider God's character. I think about the way that God was abandoned for me.

And so that meant that I would never be abandoned. Make your faith like that of an astronaut where they knew and trusted the instruments and the people that were back home and they continued on and they carried out their mission.

Don't be a fluffy astronaut. Be instead one who continues on and trusts and continues to grasp and to grip hold of the grace of God.

At work, you might get persecuted for being a Christian. Maybe your boss wants you to do something you know isn't right and in faith you say no and you're mistreated because of it or worse, you get fired and you ask, what is God doing?

Is he trying to teach me something in this? Faith looks beyond the short term to see what God is doing in the bigger picture because in the short run there is pain but in the long run we know that people with integrity are valued and people want to do business with people with integrity or if you're in a school where it's definitely not cool to be a Christian, people laugh at you or think you're crazy or you're stuck up and yet you stick to your guns, you stick to your beliefs and eventually God shows you who your true friends are, the ones who stick with you through good and bad.

[35 : 29] Watch the stories that God is weaving into your life. Remember, don't demand the story goes your way. Look for the storyteller in your life and stay in the story.

If things go wrong, we're so tempted to just check out and think, well, God obviously has abandoned me, he obviously doesn't care for me, I'm just going to do my own thing from now on. That is not a true picture of the character of God. The true picture of the character of God comes from the cross where we see that God kept his promise even at great personal cost to himself. And so as we remember that, then that encourages us or let us encourage one another to continue to stick with God the way that he has stuck with us.

Let's pray. Father, we ask that you would help us to be like you in your faithfulness.

[36 : 39] We ask that you would help us to understand and know more of your character, to get to know you more so that we can trust and love you more.

We think of Abraham who, for 25 years, was wandering through the hills and the desert trusting in your word, trusting in your promise and that you came through for him.

and we think of Jesus who, because he wanted to fulfill that promise, went to the cross for our sakes and took our unrighteousness and made us righteous.

And Father, in our own lives, we know that there are many things that hurt and can damage us and yet we look to you as one who's promised to bring us to greater and greater glory.

And so we ask that you would help us to trust in you, to look to you, to be the one who weaves our story together. And so we ask that you would help us then to trust and rely not in ourselves, not on our strength, but in yours.

[37 : 56] Amen.