Doubt and the Faithfulness of God
Genesis 15:1-21

Over the summer we're looking at the Patriarchs and Matriarchs - the fore-fathers and mothers of the Jewish people. And today, we're going to look again at Abraham. And of course, when it comes to Abraham, he's not just a forefather of the Jewish people. Whether it's Judaism, Christianity or Islam - all three of the great world-wide religions look to Abraham as their forebear.
Think about that. That means that whether they realise it or not, literally billions of people around the world are in some way taking their cue for life from him.

And today we're going to look at an episode of which one commentator says, 'No event of Abram's life surpasses this in importance' (Baldwin). In other words, in the life of a man, whose life continues to impact billions of people, this is the event that defines him.

But if you look closely, in this episode, Abraham's wrestling with something all of us face - whether that's on a daily basis, or in crisis moments: and it's doubt. Whether you're a Christian or not; whether it's that nagging uncertainty at the back of your mind or that crisis of faith; whether it's the question, 'should I believe this?' or 'am I a fool to believe?' - all of us face doubt. And what this passage tells us is, so did Abraham - the one the Bible calls the man of faith and the father of faith.

So we're going to look at three things: the roots of doubt, the faces of doubt and the answer to doubt.

The Roots of Doubt
Look at v1: 'After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."'

Now, in the Bible, whenever God, or some angelic being, appears to someone and tells them, 'Fear not' you can bet that person if they didn't have reason to be afraid before they do now. So what's up with Abram? Why's he feeling the cold chill of fear that God has to tell him not to?

Well, those words, 'after these things' give us a clue, don't they. Something has happened to Abraham, right before this episode, that's making him fearful. And chapter 14 tells us, and it might surprise you, because it's a stunning victory.

You see, Abraham was living in a war-zone, with running battles being fought between local chieftains. And Abraham's nephew, Lot, who was living in Sodom, had been taken captive, along with others, and along with a whole load of the possessions of the citizens of Sodom.

And so, under the cover of darkness, like something out of an SAS or US Navy Seals covert operation, Abraham leads a military mission to rescue them, and he succeeds and he recovers both the people and the possessions.

And what chapter 14 describes is not just a great military victory, but a moral one. Because when the king of Sodom comes to thank Abram, the king says, 'I'll take my people but you can keep all the possessions as a thank you.' That would have been a seriously tempting offer, wouldn't it? I mean, think what you could buy with the gold and the silver. Think how you wouldn't have to worry about the future quite so much with just a little bit more in the bank. And, hey, Abram's risked his life and his men's lives for this, so it's only appropriate that there's some kind of reward. And yet, Abraham replies, 'No. God's my provider, and I'm not going to have you saying, 'You

know what, it was me, the king of Sodom, who made Abram rich.' So thank you, but you can take your people *and* you can keep your stuff.'

And yet, with that military and moral victory behind him, what's Abram now experiencing in his heart that makes God come to him and say, 'Fear not Abram'? it's what so often follows the mountain top experience, isn't it? The crash into the valley. And haven't you experienced how great moments of faith and courage and victory can be followed by slumps into doubt and fear, and temptation and despair.

And if you have, you're not alone. Think about Elijah. He secures his greatest victory over the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel. And yet, within hours he's in a pit of depression, feeling utterly alone and thinking he'd be better off dead. Think of John the Baptist, who has led hundred if nt thousands in repentance and paved the way for Christ, but from his prison cell sends to ask Jesus, 'are you really the one, or have I got this totally wrong?' Or think of the Lord Jesus himself - who at his baptism hears the voice of God telling him, Matthew 3:17, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." But in the very next chapter, is alone in the desert and Matthew tells us, 'And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God…"' (Matt:4:3) and doubt is being sown.

You see, the hard times of life have their own kind of trials and temptations, don't they. But so too do times of victory and triumph, and one of those is the post-victory slump that can follow. And Abraham has been in a battle, and the adrenaline and tension and psychological stress are high. But what follows is a doubt filled low.

And what God says to him tells us why.

Verse 1 again, "Fear not, Abram, *I am your shield*; your reward shall be very great." And Abram's just inflicted a defeat on some of the local chieftains. But Abram's lying in his tent at night thinking, 'But what next? Are they just going to lie down and just take that? Or are they going to come against me with even more men in retaliation? And what about the king of Sodom? Is he now going to start seeing me as a threat?' And so Abram's feeling vulnerable, at risk and exposed. Sure he's won a victory but now the fears and doubts are racing in. And he's thinking - 'sure I protected and rescued Lot. But who's going to protect me?'

But there's something else going on, because it's not just the king of Sodom he's said 'no' to; it's the financial security and the recognition and reputation that the riches of the spoils of battle could have given him. And as he lies there in his tent, he's playing it over in his mind: Have I just done something really stupid? In saying no to the bounty and the loot and the money, have I just turned my back on the very thing that would have made me someone?

So, what's Abraham questioning? What's my shield and what's my reward? What security do I have? What does my life consist of?

What would you answer for yourself? Because we're all looking to something as our shield and our reward, aren't we? Something that tells us that we're going to be ok, and that we are ok. It could be your job or your family, your financial status, or your looks or level of fitness - things that tell you, all the time I have this, I'm ok. It could be the experiences you're notching up on or the cool places

you've visited, it could be your reputation with others or your research output that tells you, I'm doing ok, I am ok, I'm becoming someone.

Whatever it is, something or someone is going to be your shield and your reward.

But what happens when those are shaken and you realise they're not as secure as you thought they were? Because that's what Abraham's sensing. You begin to feel vulnerable. Because you realise that your shield and your reward are in fact no shield and no reward.

And so the Lord comes to Abram and says, 'I'm your shield' and as some translations put it, 'I'm your very great reward.' Abram, how can you know that you're *going* to be ok, and that you *are* ok? Look to me Abram.

But did you notice how Abraham responds to that? He doubts. He questions. Verse 2-3, 'But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir."'

Now, to understand the depth of Abram's anguish, look back at v1, 'The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision.' So Abram's not just having some vague impression that this might be what the Lord is saying to him. It's not even him reading something, or hearing someone say something and thinking, 'wow, the Lord really spoke to me through that.' That expression, 'the word of the Lord came' isn't used anywhere else in the Pentateuch, except here. But it is used multiple times in the prophets to describe what the prophets experienced. So when we're told in v1 that this was 'a vision' - whatever form it took, this was a revelation of God himself to Abraham.

And in the face of God, and with the word of God ringing in his ears, Abram says, 'Great. Sure you're my shield and very great reward, but what good is that if I'm childless. I mean, you make all these promises but they're meaningless. Just look at the circumstances of my life. What good's an inheritance if I have no children to inherit it.'

Do you know something of what Abram's going through? You read or hear about God being your security and your identity and you think, 'sure, but what use is that when I'm single, or when my marriage hurts so much, or my kids are making bad choices, or my work sucks.' When, as with Abraham, when the circumstances of our lives seem at odds with the promises of God. It's a fertile ground for doubt to grow in, isn't it.

But this episode doesn't just show us the roots of doubt, but the shapes it takes.

The Faces of Doubt
And Abraham's doubt has two:

Firstly, he doubts God. Verse 2 again, "What will you give me, for I continue childless?" You've made me these great promises, you've said you're going to give me an inheritance and that from me will come a great nation, but I don't even have a child, let alone a nation! So, where's the making good on the promises?

What's he doubting? God's truthfulness? God's goodness - do you actually care, God? God's ability: can you really give me and Sarah a child when we're old and have years of infertility behind us? God's timing? Because Abram wants a son *now*.

You see, last week we saw how God told Abram to leave his homeland and go to another land, and it was as if in response to the question 'where?' God says, 'I'll show you when you get there.' And now, God is saying, 'I will give you a son', and Abram's saying, 'when?' And the Lord says, 'when I give you one.'

And maybe you know what that feels like as well: when the Lord is taking too long to come through for you, and you begin to doubt whether he ever will.

But there's a second person Abram doubts - himself. The Lord promises to give Abram the land and, v8, 'But he said, "O Lord God, how am *I* to know that *I* shall possess it?"' And you could see that as Abram just asking for clarification. Except think how it works in your own heart. It's not just God you struggle to trust, it's yourself. Maybe you've seen yourself stumble in the face of temptation too often. Maybe you see your character flaws only too clearly. And you can see this situation coming and you know how you should respond but you're thinking, like Abram, how can I know I can do this? How can I know that this time I won't screw up?

You see, it's not just his circumstances Abram's facing, it's his powerlessness. And that was something that never bothered the apostle Peter… until it did. And Jesus warned the disciples on the night he was betrayed how they would all desert him, and Peter said, 'not me! Everyone else maybe, but not me.' And yet, within hours, he'd denied Jesus three times. Why? Because he'd failed to reckon with his own powerlessness. Because he trusted himself too much. Because he thought, 'I know myself.' But he didn't.

Compare that to the father who came to Jesus asking for help for his son, who Jesus asked, 'Do you believe?' To which the father replied, 'I believe, but help my unbelief.' Because, like Abraham, he knew himself better than Peter did, and he didn't trust himself.

What are you supposed to do with those kind of doubts? Doubt rooted in fear and the circumstances of life that shows itself in a distrust of God, and doubts about ourselves.

The Answer to Doubt

Now, one of the remarkable things about this episode is that there's not a word of criticism from God toward Abram for his doubt. Commenting on this passage, John Calvin asks, how does Abram get away with it? Because basically he's disparaging God's promise of protection and provision. And Calvin asks, isn't that just a basic lack of reverence and respect? And yet, what Calvin points out is that God does not go, 'how dare you?' And neither, we might add, does he go, 'you're right to doubt, we can't be sure about anything in this life.' Instead, Calvin says two things, firstly, 'The Lord permits us to pour into his heart those cares by which we are tormented and those troubles with which we are oppressed.' In other words, God wants and is big enough to take the weight of Abram's doubts and he meets Abram where he is.

But secondly, Calvin says, because Abram's asking for a pledge, a promise about the promise… and God's gives it. Look at v4. Abram's said 'what good's an inheritance if a servant gets to inherit and not a son, and v4, 'Behold, the word of the Lord came to him: "This man shall not be your heir;

your very own son shall be your heir." And then it's as if God takes him by the hand and says 'come outside the tent Abram and look up.' And if you've ever looked up at the night sky in an area where there's no ambient light, you know what Abram saw, as God says to him, v5, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them… So shall your offspring be."

And in response to Abram's doubts God is giving him his word. Abram, I've promised you offspring and I promise I will keep my promise. And v6, Abram 'believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.' And that is a verse that rings throughout the New Testament. Because as Paul says in Romans 4, 'In the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist. In hope he [Abraham] believed against hope' (v17-18). In that moment, as God stood beside him, Abram believed that God's word was more to be trusted, was more real and more authoritative for his life, than his circumstances, than his age, or Sarah's age, or their infertility, or the threats of others. And as Paul goes on to say, in that moment Abraham was 'fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised' (v21). He knew that he, Abram, couldn't do it, but God could. God could and would protect him and provide for him. And God could and would bring life out of death and hope out of hopelessness. And God counted that faith to him as righteousness.

And that, Paul says, wasn't just written for Abraham. Romans 4:23-25, 'But the words, "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It [righteousness] will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.'

And so just as when Abram believed God more than his circumstances, when what he could not yet see was more real to him than what he could, so when we put our trust in God and what he has done for us in Christ, rather than in ourselves or our circumstances, Paul is saying that it too is counted to us as righteousness. That God looks on you and says, because you trust in my Son and not in yourself, your sin is atoned for and you are forgiven. Your shame is washed away. Your past is dealt with. And I accept you. You are ok.

Great, you might say, but why should I believe that?

Well, look at what God does next. Because it's not just his word he gives to Abram. He promises to give himself.

Verse 8, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" How do I know that I really will take possession of this land? And God tells him to bring him a heifer and a goat and a ram and a turtledove and a pigeon. And without any further explanation Abram gets them, cuts them in half and places them half against half. Why? What's he doing?

Well, when you take up a job offer, or buy a house or a car, what do you do? You sign a contract. And your signature is the proof that you will do what you're promising to do. I'll pay the money, I'll provide the goods, I'll fulfil my side of the contract. And if I don't, I've read the small print and I know what the consequences will be.

But in Abraham's day, they didn't sign a contract, they cut a covenant. And each party to the covenant would walk through the cut pieces of the animals and say, let this be done to me if I do not keep this covenant. Let me be cut in pieces, let my blood be spilled, let me experience a certain and

agonising death, if I do not fulfil my side of this agreement. Imagine if the HR department asked you to do that when you took your new job. Please bring your cow to the car-park at 9am and we'll sign the deal. It would sure make you think before signing, wouldn't it!

But before anyone goes through the pieces, God tells Abram that it's going to be hundreds of years before the promise of inheriting the land is fulfilled. And he tells him why. Firstly, his descendants, the people of Israel, will be enslaved in Egypt, and secondly, because the sins of the people currently in the land have not yet reached the limit where God says, 'now is the time for judgement.'

What's that got to say to your own doubts? It's that God has his timing. And Abram wants the land now and God is saying, 'not yet Abram, and I have my reasons, and they are reasons of justice and mercy.' And you and I may have no idea why God is taking his time in coming through for you. But whether it's his work in your life, or in others' lives, he always has his reasons.

But having explained his timing, the sun goes down and it becomes very dark. And instead of Abraham walking through the cut pieces alone - which is what would have happened in most covenants between lesser and greater parties; and instead of Abraham and God both walking through as would have happened with equal parties - Abraham watches as, v17, 'A smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the pieces.'

And whether it was God descending on mount Sinai in smoke and fire, or God leading Israel through the desert by a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night, smoke and fire are the signs of God's presence. And like some piece of ultra-radioactive glowing burning smoking metal, it's as if God condenses the fire and smoke of his presence into a cauldron, and says, 'Abram, look. It's me and only me who passes through the pieces. Let this be done to me if I fail to keep my word to you, and let this be done to me if *you* fail to keep your word to me. Let *me* be cut in pieces, let *my* blood be spilt, let *me* suffer a certain and agonising death, let the curse fall on *me* if you fail to keep this covenant. Because Abram, it doesn't depend on you at all. It stands or falls on me. And I will never let you down.'

What's that got to do with your doubts about God or about yourself? Well, look what happens to Christ on the cross. Because here we're told that, v12 'dreadful and great darkness fell upon [Abram].' And at the cross a dreadful darkness fell upon Christ as the sun was blotted out. And here God acts out what would happen to him if Abram or he failed to keep the covenant. But at the cross, Jesus doesn't act it out, he goes through with it. And the curse of the covenant falls on him, and his blood was spilt, and as Isaiah says, 'he was cut off from the land of the living.' And the judgement that God says will fall upon him falls upon Christ. Not for his failure, but for ours.

And so, at the cross, God is saying, your protection and your future, your salvation, does not depend on you. It depends on Christ. And you're right not to trust yourself, but you're not supposed to trust yourself. But you can trust Christ. Because, as we will act out as we take communion together now, if Jesus was cut off for you and cut into pieces for you, if his blood was shed for you, then you can trust his plans and purposes for you. And you can trust his timing. And you can trust his love. Because he is your shield and your very great reward and he will never let you down.