I. Set Up: Today we are in week five of our series, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, and Mike is going to share a story that – if you have ever read it, you probably failed to appreciate what amazingly encouraging news it is.

II. Intro:

A. Do you <u>trust</u> God? Should you? I mean, it's not like he hasn't let you down, right? Your life has had more than a few disappointments. Right now you're facing challenges you did not expect to face. And you have unanswered prayers. Some big ones. Can you trust God?

B. It's a big question. And timely. We're living in a low trust moment. We do not trust the media or the courts or Higher Ed or the church. And there are studies suggesting that we do not trust each other like we used to. Can we trust God? Should we trust God?

C. In today's text, Abraham calls the question. It's been ten years since God made a deal with Abraham, and God has yet to deliver on his promises. And so, when God offers Abraham some assurances, Abraham essentially stops him and says, "And why would I believe that? Why would I trust you? And God does something quite amazing.

III. Let me pause here to say:

A. Welcome to everyone – those joining us at The 01, CR, HP, VH, at home or wherever. With a special welcome to those who are new to Christ Church.

B. And, if you are new here, let me explain that this is week five of a forty-week trek through the Bible – one that is focusing on forty of the passages that, when taken together , tell the story. We are connecting the dots so that we can see the big picture.

C. This series is shaped by two big ideas:

1. First, everyone has a worldview - a lens, a working theory about life. We have answers to the big questions: *Who am I? Where did I come from. What really matters. What's expected of me? What happens when I die? Where do I go for answers to these questions*? The first big assumption shaping this series is that – whether we know it or not - we all have a working theory about life.

2. The second is, many who say their working theory is Christianity – that they see the world through a the Bible, through a biblical lens – do not understand the Bible. They know some Bible stories – e.g., Daniel in the Lion's Den, David and Goliath, the Prodigal Son – but they do not understand The Story. They have not connected the dots to see the big picture. That's what we're doing.

D. This is week five and we are in Genesis 15.

1. In week one we saw that a good God created everything everywhere and retains all rights. We belong to Him. In week two we read about a failed coup that profoundly damaged a good world. We were in charge. We failed. As a result, we fell. We're now broken and we live in a broken world. Week one was all good news. Week two was mostly bad news, although, in week two – we saw that in Genesis 3

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there is a promise. God says he will send help: the seed of woman will come and destroy evil. Week three was a parade through Genesis 4 – 11, which was almost all bad: Cain killed Abel and then Lamech was worse than Cain. We read about Noah and a flood and The Tower of Babel. The point being made is: things are very bad. We are not going to be able to fix our problems. We are not going to be able to fix ourselves. All depends on God keeping his promise.

2. And then last week - in Genesis 12 - the curtain went up on the play that is going to unpack the story. We are now following along to see what is going to happen. Is God going to keep his promise. And if so, how?

3. For the purposes of making this as simple as I can, I said the story unfold in three acts and that Act One - the Old Testament - has 8 scenes. We are still in Act One Scene One. It deals with Abraham and his immediate descendants. Last week we read as God offered Abraham - a 75-year-old semi-nomadic shepherd wandering about in the Fertile Crescent during the Middle of Bronze Age – a deal. God said, "If you leave everything and go where I send you, and I will give you land, descendants and bless the world through you. Abraham said yes. But ten years have gone by, and God has yet to do what he said he would.

IV. Genesis 15:

A. **After this –** that is, after Abraham had rescued his nephew Lot in a high-stakes, high-drama military operation. (Genesis 14 tells us that four eastern kings had invaded Canaan and carried Lot away as a prisoner. In response, Abraham gathered 318 trained men from his household – which shows you he has gained some wealth – pursued the invaders and rescued Lot).

B. **The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:** This is a significant statement. It will later be used when God speaks to the prophets—those who stand between God and humanity and speak God's word to the people. (Priests stand between God and the people and speak to God for the people; prophets stand between God and the people and speak to the people for God). The phrase **"the word of the Lord"** suggests that God was speaking quite specifically and directly to Abraham.

C. **'Do not be afraid, Abram.'"** Whenever God says, "Do not be afraid," it is generally because someone is afraid. Abraham is likely afraid that the kings he just attacked will retaliate against him.

D. "I am your shield, your very great reward." I've got this. I will protect you. You can relax.

E. But Abraham is not having it. **But Abram said, "Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless.** Why would I trust you. You promised that we would have a son. That is what I care most about, and you have failed to deliver.

F. We remain childless, and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" Abraham obviously has money and power, but what God promised was land and descendants, and he has yet to see a descendant, so he and Sarah have formally adopted one of their servants.

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1. Adoption is a wonderful, beautiful way forward. Adoption will become a big concept later in the series. But God made it clear that this was not his plan. Ten years have gone by and God has not kept his promise.

G. And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." I am going to keep my promise. And not in a small way.

H. V6: **Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.** OK, this is a big line. If you underline things in your Bible, underline this. It is one of the most consequential verses in the entire Bible because it explains how sinful people can be made right with a holy God.

I. In his letter to the Romans, Paul will cite it in his efforts to explain that most people misunderstand how we are reconciled to God. Many people — dare I say most people - think that God accepts us because we are good and religious enough. They assume that Christianity is fundamentally a moral improvement program: obey the rules, become a better person and hope that God is impressed. The equation I have used for that is: Faith + Works = Salvation. In this passage, and many, many more to follow, it becomes clear that the equation is not F+W=S, but Faith = Salvation + Works. Abrahm believed (placed his faith in the Lord) and God credited (it's an accounting term, he deposited into his account) what he needed to be reconciled.

1. The verse does not say that Abram understood how God would fulfill the promise. It does not say that the circumstances had changed. Sarah's still childless, Abram's still old and they still have no child. The only thing Abram possessed was the promise of God—and he rested his future upon it.

2. This is not faith in faith. It is not positive thinking or emotional certainty. It is certainly not confidence in Abram's moral performance.

3. Abram's faith is valuable because of its object: the promise and character of God. Faith does not mean convincing yourself that everything will work out as you want. It means trusting that God is faithful even when you cannot see how he will work things out.

4. This is the difference between religion and the gospel. Religion says: "I obey; therefore God accepts me." The gospel says: "God accepts me; therefore I obey."

5. Abram's faith is not exceptionally strong. Abram is not declared righteous because his faith is exceptionally strong. Genesis will soon show that his faith remains inconsistent. He will become impatient, make serious mistakes and attempt to secure God's promise through his own schemes. Yet God's promise does not finally depend upon the strength of Abram's grip on God; it depends upon the strength of God's grip on Abram.

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a) Weak faith in a strong Savior is infinitely better than strong faith in yourself. The issue is not whether your faith ever trembles. The issue is where you go when it does.

6. OK, as I said, more on this to come. This very verse will be part of Paul's explanation of salvation in Romans 3 and 4.

J. Moving on: **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 Abram said, Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"** So, he had faith for about half a second, but then he was back with his doubts.

K. V9: **So the Lord said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon." Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other.** Abraham does what he is asked and more, because he understands – or thinks he does – what is about to happen. They're about to sign a contract in the way they signed contracts 4,000 years ago. You may have heard about "cutting a contract." It comes from this practice. The animals are cut in half, and the people walk between the two halves, as if to say, "if I do not keep my end of this deal, may I be cut in half."

L. V12: **As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.** Fear. He is overwhelmed. **Then the Lord said to him, "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants I am going to give you will be strangers in a country not their own** that will be in Egypt **and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there.**

M. V14: **But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions.** We saw this two years ago when we did a long study in Exodus. After the tenth plague the Egyptians gave lots of money to the Jews begging them to leave **You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age.** Abraham, you have no need to fear for yourself. **In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."** In ways we do not understand – and which are very, very unpopular today, a patient God does eventually move in judgment on people. There is not ultimate justice on this side of the grave, but there is some.

N. V17: **When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch** we have a theophany here. God makes an appearance. This is Mount Sinai language. Other translators struggle to put into English what we are being told here. In other places God has manifest his presence in other ways – in Exodus he was a burning bush at one point and a pillar of cloud by day and a fire by night. In Ezekiel there is lots of fire and smoke the idea of a wheel within a wheel. The Hebrew here in Genesis 15 is difficult to reproduce precisely. The NIV says "a smoking firepot with a blazing torch." The NASB says "a smoking oven and a flaming torch," while the King James Version has "a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp." I read a number. The one I like best is "a furnace of smoke and a lamp of fire."[i]

O. We should probably not try to imagine this too precisely. What happened was amazing and terrifying the point that was obvious to Abraham was that God had **appeared and passed through the pieces.**

P. **On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land -** The verb tense here renders this "I have given" — a past-tense verb describing something that hasn't happened yet. This is what Hebrew grammarians call the "prophetic perfect": a future so certain that the language treats it as already done - **from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates - the land** and then we get a list of the land – that is God's – that is currently occupied by all of these groups.

V. OK, there are three things to see here. This is a challenging passage, but it's a very important one. It is both profoundly shocking and profoundly encouraging after you realize three things:

A. First, 2,000 years ago, Kings didn't "walk the line" except, perhaps, with other kings. But never with someone who didn't have their power. After a king conquered an area, he would force those he conquered to sign a contract – to "cut a covenant." They were forced to pledge to do X, Z and Y at the pain of being ripped in half if they did not. But the king made no such commitment. In this passage, God walks the line. He shows up and takes the oath. Abraham says, I do not know if I can trust you. And so God says, "Abraham, let's cut a covenant. If I do not keep my word, may I be ripped in two. May the immortal become mortal. This is shocking.

B. But that's only part of it. We also need to see that Abraham does not walk between the pieces. In doing this, God is saying: if I do not keep my word, may I suffer – be ripped in two. And, if you fail to keep the covenant, I will suffer. God takes all the responsibility on himself.

C. And - don't miss this. I'm going to be outrunning my headlight here, but I want to be sure you start connecting the dots – this is what will happen. Abraham and his people will fail. And God will die. Abraham (as a placeholder for people) will fail and God will pay the penalty for Abraham's failure.

1. In this text, we're told that Abraham entered into a deep darkness. Well, centuries later, a descendant of Abraham will enter into a deeper darkness. At the cross, darkness covered the land and Jesus – the Son of God, the only faithful covenant keeper – will be treated as the covenant breaker. Jesus will bear the curse that Abram and his descendants (you and me) deserved.

2. In Genesis 15, God did not merely say: "If I fail, may this happen to me." He said: "If you fail, may this happen to me." And so, Jesus receives the curse so that everyone who believes receives his righteousness.

D. This is a heavy passage. And, honestly, I am not sure we can get it. Let me end with a story of a time it came into focus for me.

E. It was about 15 years ago. A friend and I had each taken our youngest boys and sailed across Lake Michigan. We intended to spend the night, turn around and sail back. But the weather turned bad and so we spent a day at South Haven hanging out. At some point we went to the beach where there were monster waves and we spent some time body

surfing. We had decided that it was a bit too rough and were calling our boys in. I had said to Jason, it's too rough. If you got in trouble, I could not help you. And he was saying, "it's fine. It's all good. No problem. Don't worry." And we were both having these conversations with our boys when we heard people yelling because a number of people had gotten caught in a rip tide and were being pulled out next to the long pier.

F. And so we ran there to help. By the time we got there, four kids had been pulled out and were fine. And one adult had been pulled out and he was in bad shape - but he would be OK. But there was one guy who had just gone face down in the water and there were four guys in the water with him trying to help.

G. And my friend took over and we spent about ten minutes trying to get him onto the dock – timing it with waves that were very erratic. And we couldn't do it. And I said to my friend, "I'm going in." And he said, "No." And I said, "We are running out of time and this isn't working." And he said, "he's gone. We have a different problem. Those four guys are in trouble but just haven't figured it out yet. I need you to help me get them out."

H. And that is what we started to do. And it was about that moment that the police and fire department showed up and took over and told everyone on the dock that they needed to leave.

I. And so Dan and I and the boys – all of us a bit shaken up. The kids who were rescued belonged to the man who drowned. They and their mother were obviously very distraught. It was a horrible situation. So, Dan and I and our two boys walked off the dock, sat down and immediately started thinking about what we could have done differently. We had failed and so, for the next hour – and then off and on over the 14 hour sail back home – we kept wondering about what we should have done.

J. And I had more than a little guilt that I had not jumped in. But Dan kept saying, "That would have made it worse. You might have drowned and we would not have been able to get those other guys to safety."

K. Well, I wrestled with guilt off and on over the next few weeks – and then, one morning about three months later, I was walking down the stairs early in the morning, reciting what I have called the John Stott prayer, because is appeared in a Christianity Today article about him. It reads:

> 1. Good morning, heavenly Father; good morning, Lord Jesus; good morning, Holy Spirit. Heavenly Father, I worship you as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Lord Jesus, I worship you, Savior and Lord of the world. Holy Spirit, I worship you, Sanctifier of the people of God. Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.
>
> Heavenly Father, I pray that I may live this day in your presence and please you more and more. Lord Jesus, I pray that this day I may take up my cross and follow you. Holy Spirit, I pray that this day you will fill me with yourself and cause your fruit to ripen in my life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Holy, blessed, and glorious Trinity, three persons in one God, have mercy upon me. Amen.

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L. When I said it differently. I didn't say, You are the Savior." I said, "You saved me." And it hit me, I didn't save that man. And immediately I thought, "We've been over this. Had I jumped in I might have drowned." And immediately I thought, "he jumped in knowing he would die." And I said down on their stairs. It was 5 AM. Very dark. I just sat down on the stairs to think about this. And suddenly – for the first time ever – it occurred to me, I could have sent Jason in to help. He was a better swimmer than I was. He was on the swim team. He would go on to be captain of the Water Polo team and a lifeguard. He was a better swimmer than I was. I could have had him jump in. In all the debriefs I had done, it had never occurred to me, I could have sent my son. That is an unthinkable thought.

M. And yet, that is what God did.

N. Most of us know that well. John 3:16 is a verse many have heard at least a few times. For God so loved the world that He sent his only begotten son. That whoever believes in him will have eternal life.

O. But I am pretty sure the punch of that passage has faded. God sent his son to the cross.

P. Can we trust God? That was Abraham's question. That is likely your question. What more could he do?

Q. In Psalm 84:11 we are told that God does not withhold any good thing from those whose walk is blameless." Romans 8:32 puts a sharper point on it. "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

R. When your circumstances cause you to wonder whether God has forgotten you, do not measure his love by the appearance of the moment, measure it by the cross.

S. We may not understand why God delays keeping his promise, but at the cross, God has shown how far he will go to keep his word. Can we trust him? Yes we can.

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[i] This is Young's Literal translation. The criticism of this is that the Hebrew word tannur suggests something small.

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