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**Sunday 28 February to Sunday 7 March**

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Sunday 28 February 2021

# The promises of God

by Pastor Tim Castle-Schmidt

**Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward (Genesis 15:1).**

Read Genesis 15:1–12

I sometimes wonder what God has promised me. Despite my many blessings, the aftermath of 2020 leaves me questioning just what we can rely upon in the future. After significant turmoil and change, it is hard to imagine just what the ‘new normal’ might look like. And yet, I know without a doubt that God has promised to be my shield. This, indeed, was Abram’s (Abraham’s) struggle. The Lord promises to be Abraham’s shield, his reward (verse 1), and yet Abraham questions how this could be true when he has no heir (verses 2,3). But the Lord reiterates his promises with enormous extravagance: ‘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’ (verse 5).

Here we have a sharp exchange in which Abraham stands face to face with God and seeks to refute the promise and resist the assurance. Clearly, the faith to which Abraham is called is not a peaceful, pious acceptance. It is a hard-fought and deeply argued conviction.

The Lord leads Abraham through the depths to teach him to live by faith. Abraham and Sarah are called to live their lives despite their barrenness.

We have no promise that the barrenness we may have experienced last year will turn to extravagance, but that it can teach us to live by faith! This does not, on the surface, make sense; and yet it is a key insight of biblical faith. It’s as if this ‘gift’ from God draws hope out from within us as blood is drawn out through a needle – not easily or painlessly. But the end result is a new hope, a renewed understanding of hope, which runs freely like the blood into the syringe.

So, what has God promised me, us? That he is our reward and he will remain with us in this journey of life forever.

**Heavenly Father, draw hope out of us when life seems hopeless. Meet us when we need you and help us hear your words of comfort spoken to us. Amen.**

Monday 1 March 2021

# The invitation

by Pastor Tim Castle-Schmidt

**Calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, ‘Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead’ (Mark 8:38).**

Read Mark 8:31–38

We often hear and read these words as a threat to us, the demand to give up everything and follow Jesus. And this is precisely what Jesus asks of us. And yet, if we can reframe it from a demand to an invitation, ‘come with me, and see what we can do together’, it is totally different. Then the demand becomes an offer, an invitation to a whole new way of living.

I think this is what Jesus asks of us: to consider an alternative way of living that rejects the consumerist, prosperity-driven lifestyle of the world. The invitation is to, like Jesus, transcend our self-centred way of living to live for others and advocate for fairness and justice, not just locally but also globally.

As we continue through the season of Lent and reflect upon our call to discipleship, I hope that we can see this as an exciting and fulfilling call. This call invites us to live in a new way. We have been brought into the New Covenant in which Jesus lives through us. As we follow him, he invites us to be his presence in the world.

**Lord Jesus, help us to follow you and find fulfilment in living in a new way with you. Amen.**

Tuesday 2 March 2021

# Don’t panic

by Pastor Tim Castle-Schmidt

**That’s right. Because I, your God, have a firm grip on you and I’m not letting go. I’m telling you, ‘Don’t panic. I’m right here to help you’ (Isaiah 41:13).**

Read Isaiah 41:8–13

Any of you unfamiliar with the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy book series only need to know this instruction about hitchhiking through the galaxy: don’t panic. Despite the outrageous situation that the characters get into, time and again, they escape calamity, including giant whales falling from the sky, the collision of supernova, food poisoning at the restaurant at the end of the universe, and even death. They were guided only by this statement: don’t panic.

And that is the motto the Lord encourages his people to live by. Through the prophet Isaiah, God reminds his people he has chosen them and that he will look after them. And so our Father in Christ reminds us that we are in his care now. Despite what we may have done, our many failings and the insecurity that currently engulfs our world, our Father promises to be with us and bring us through all trials and tribulations – and not because we are worthy. Our faith in our Father does not even make it happen, but it is purely the desire of our Father to look after us.

If this Lenten journey is anything, may it be a reminder that our Father loves us despite our efforts to be lovable. And so: don’t panic.

**Heavenly Father, remind us again and again that you’ve got this. When our world turns upside down, remind us that you join us in being upside down. And that you can turn things around again. Amen.**

Wednesday 3 March 2021

# The covenantal God

by Pastor Tim Castle-Schmidt

**I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances (Isaiah 49:8b).**

Read Isaiah 49:7–13

God seems to like covenants. Covenants are agreements between parties; typically, they involve an exchange, a transaction. The Old Covenant, typified by the Law of Moses and the Ten Commandments, was an example of such a covenant. If Israel would keep the Lord’s commands, he would protect them and prosper them. And yet, we all know what happened. Time and again, the people of Israel failed to keep their part of the covenant, and yet time and again, God forgave them and despite that and stuck with them.

In Jesus though, the New Covenant is not so much based on a transaction as it is on a relationship. We, God’s people, are brought right into the intimacy of family; we enter into a relational covenant with the Father.

But more than that, just as Israel was to be a blessing for all nations, we are now God’s emissaries to a world in need of good news. We, God’s people, not through the law but through faith, are called on to shine God’s love, justice and peace into the world, to illuminate the world not through threats but through the invitation into the royal family. This covenant is formed, not through a transaction, but through the life-giving invitation to be part of the family, and so to share the benefits of our royal inheritance with whomever God might lead into our path.

**Heavenly Father, thank you for bringing us into the family through Jesus. Help us to allow your light to shine through us into this world of yours. Amen.**

Thursday 4 March 2021

# A questionable defence

by Pastor Tim Castle-Schmidt

**His descendants would be resident aliens in a country belonging to others, who would enslave them and mistreat them during four hundred years (Acts 7:6).**

Read Acts 7:2–8

Thus begins Stephen’s defence of the accusation that he is a Jesus-follower and that he is undermining the power of the synagogue. Stephen goes on to recount the history of Israel, God’s choosing of Abraham, and the repeated failure of the people of Israel to live up to God’s requirements.

To recount the failures of your ancestors is a pretty questionable way to try to influence your accusers. But I suspect that Stephen wasn’t too interested in his own defence; he was most interested in the last few words of his preamble: ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place’.

Stephen goes on to argue that in Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection, he has become the place where people can worship the Father. Despite their loss of the Promised Land, despite our loss of some freedom during this pandemic, we need not fear nor even try to defend ourselves before others, as we can be assured that, like Abraham, God has chosen us. Even though we may not be able to (yet) see our inheritance, it is in God’s nail-pierced hands.

**Lord Jesus, even when we can’t see far enough ahead to know where we are going, grant us the faith to trust that in your nail-pierced hands is the promise that we, too, can worship the Father in you. Amen.**

Friday 5 March 2021

# ‘In tents faith’

by Pastor Tim Castle-Schmidt

**By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise (Hebrews 11:9).**

Read Hebrews 11:8–12

Would you be happy living in a tent when you knew you had an enormous inheritance? An inheritance that could allow you to live out your days comfortably?

Because that is what Abraham had: faith to live in a tent despite the promise of a nation for his heirs. He had ‘in tents faith’. And yet, it wasn’t his faith through which the promise was fulfilled, but the faithfulness of Yahweh, the promise-giver.

Living in a tent is itself a bit of an act of faith. You have to trust that you won’t get wet, blown away or devoured by the local wildlife. And I suspect that’s part of the attraction of camping; you have to trust that you’ll cope, and that can be intense.

And so, when we are faced with a disruptive event, we are invited to have Abraham’s ‘in tents faith’. Faith to live in a tent when we have the promise of a castle. And that’s not so bad. Abraham and Sarah never entered the Promised Land, and yet their living by faith – intense faith – gave them the energy and connection with reality that was needed for them at that moment.

**Lord God, the one who chose Abraham, enliven us with the faith to hang on in the face of adversity, knowing that you promise to be with us through it all. Amen.**

Saturday 6 March 2021

# The ways of the righteous

by Pastor Tim Castle-Schmidt

**For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction (Psalm 1:6).**

Read Psalm 1

I’ve got a confession to make: Psalm 1 no more describes me than does the phrase ‘mercurial athlete’. How I would love to be the person planted in that stream, who prospers at whatever I do.

Our world so rewards people for their achievements. Not so with our God. Our God watches over the way of the righteous, and yet we still prosper! And that can only be because our righteousness is not our own. We live by God’s grace, daily. We prosper because God imputes Christ’s righteousness to us. We are only made righteous when we acknowledge that we are utterly unrighteous. It is only when we go to God empty-handed that God fills us up to overflowing.

Our righteousness, then, is fleeting; as soon as we think we have grasped it, it is gone! Well, it would be if it counted on us. But we can be assured that in Christ we are made fully righteous, freed to live and freed to serve.

The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, indeed. It only once we have been made righteous in Christ that we can do anything worthwhile. So stand in Christ’s righteousness, lift up the lowly and stand up for the oppressed.

**Thank you, Lord, for making me right with you. May your righteousness flow through me to others, that they, too, may receive your gift. Amen.**

Sunday 7 March 2021

# Misunderstandings

by Maria Rudolph

**But the temple he had spoken of was his body (John 2:21).**

Read John 2:13–22

‘What are you reading?!’ asked my housemate with raised eyebrows and curious eyes looking up and down the cover of my Good News Bible. ‘The BIBLE?’ And with that, she stared at me tauntingly, with amusement mixed in her voice. A hot flush climbed up from my neck to the top of my head. I was so embarrassed.

I wasn’t equipped to say anything back. Sure, afterwards, back in my room, I thought of lots of replies I could have given. But it was too late. And I didn’t like confrontation, especially on a topic that I knew so little about. I had only just started reading the Bible and had only just begun the journey toward baptism. It doesn’t take long to realise that Jesus is offensive.

Over a decade later, I think my housemate, along with many other people in our society, misunderstand Jesus. Some think Christians are a bunch of pious do-gooders. Boring party poopers at best. But by studying the Bible, I have come to realise that Jesus often provokes these kinds of confrontations, because he is so different, he aims straight at our heartstrings. There is no pretence with Jesus. We can either follow Jesus with all our heart, or it becomes impossible to follow him at all. Because Jesus offends. And Jesus is misunderstood.

Jesus was misunderstood throughout his ministry. Again and again, people around him were baffled and appalled by his words. When he zealously drives the money changers and vendors of sacrificial animals from the temple courts and is questioned about it, he simply predicts his death and resurrection – and this prophecy is misunderstood. Sometime later, we find Jesus teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. His teaching raises the hairs of his audience. ‘Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you’ (John 6:53). Again, Jesus is misunderstood and ‘from this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him’ (John 6:66).

The words of Jesus are tough, alright? Do we fare any better when we follow Jesus today? The 12 closest of Jesus’ disciples stood out from the rest – although they even had a betrayer in their midst, known to Jesus! Simon Peter puts it in clumsy, profound words: ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life’ (John 6:68). This trusting faith was confirmed when ‘after he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said [about rebuilding the temple, his body, in three days]. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken’ (John 2:22).

In the same way, when we are taunted and laughed at for our faith in Jesus Christ, we must consider what other options we really have. What else can give us salvation, the grace to make a new beginning despite our failings, day after day? What else would be a solid foundation to build our lives onto? Sometimes offensive, and often misunderstood, yet always fully enveloped in the love of God the Father and guided by the Holy Spirit, walk on, sometimes full of confidence and sometimes placing one embarrassed foot in front of the other, but always sure that God is with you all the way.

**Holy Spirit, come, fill my heart with faith and strengthen my trust in Jesus when I am taunted by others for it and when I find the words of Scripture difficult to digest. Make every part of my heart and soul cling to you alone so that zeal for your word and the love and gentleness you teach flows out of me today as I encounter others. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**