

The Fruit of the Spirit - Faithfulness (Part 1)

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[0 : 0 0] Well, today we are going to continue our study on the fruit of the Spirit. This is what we've been looking at over recent weeks. The remarkable words and teaching that we find in Galatians 5 verses 22 and 23. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law. Now we are nearing the end of our study here and today our topic is faithfulness. And as we've been saying throughout this study, the fruit of the Spirit outlines the effect and the evidence of having God, the Holy Spirit, dwelling in our hearts. As Christians we should be characterised by faithfulness and that should be visible, evident to all those who see us. Now the first and obvious question that arises is simply what do we mean by faithfulness? And really it's very simple. It's expressing that idea of trust. The word faithfulness is related to the word faith. It's exactly the same in English as it is in Greek. It's that idea of trust, someone who is reliable, someone who is dependable, someone who is trustworthy. And so at the heart of faithfulness we see loyalty and commitment and dedication. And so it's a wonderful attribute to have and it's an amazing topic to study. And today we're going to look at two things. And I want us to look at these in a wee bit of detail. So we are going to actually devote both our services to this. This morning we are going to look at what God's faithfulness looks like. And tonight we are going to focus on what our faithfulness should look like. And I know that last Sunday evening we began looking at the amazing doctrine of the Trinity. We'll pick that up again next week. I wanted us to spend a wee bit more time on faithfulness today. So this morning our topic is what does God's faithfulness look like?

Studying the Bible is a wonderful pursuit to engage in because it reveals God's attributes to us. And you see many things. You see God's wisdom, you see God's power, his glory, his love and his other attributes among which we find the fact that God is faithful. We could choose many verses and I've just selected three. Praise the Lord all nations, extol him all peoples, for great is his steadfast love toward us and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord. That's Psalm 117. Psalm 145 is the same. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and your dominion endures throughout all generations. The Lord is faithful in all his words and kind in all his works. And the New Testament tells us the same thing. Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it. First Thessalonians 5, 23 and 24. And God's faithfulness is revealed to us in many ways and I want us just to highlight three together today. First of all, God's faithfulness is shown in what he says. That's what Psalm 145 verse 13 is emphasizing. The Lord is faithful in all his words. When God speaks, his words are trustworthy and reliable. And the place where that's seen very clearly is in the promises that God makes. If you read through the Bible, you will see that it is full. It is abounding in promises from God. And it is a fundamental truth of scripture that whenever God gives a promise, he is faithful to that promise. Joshua 21 verse 45 is a great example. Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed. All came to pass. If I think of all the promises I've made in my life and ask myself, has one word of those promises not turned out as it should have? And I have to admit it's far more than one word. But with God word for word accuracy in terms of his promises. And that's an important thing for us to remember because today, in our society, the word promise has lost its value. If you think of the fact that we're about to enter into a general election, it's a time of promises. And at a time like that, politicians are trying to draw their votes, the votes from people by giving promises of various things. But of course, I think more and more people struggle to listen to that because they're not sure they're skeptical as to whether these promises will be kept. And if I ask myself, can I remember a promise from the last general election? I can't even remember one, let alone whether or not it was kept or not, because we're in a society now where

promises are made. And we don't tend to listen because the value of a promise has gone down. But that's not through of God. With God, a promise is a promise and he will always, always be faithful. And it will be of great benefit to us if we spend a little bit of time, spend more time thinking about the promises of God, because when you go through the Bible, you will find that the Bible gives us promises for all of life's challenges, for all of the struggles that we face. Here are some examples. A promise for the burdened. If you're burdened, whether it's with worries about family or about work or about what the future may hold or about your health, if you're burdened, Psalm 55, verse 22 says, cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you. That's a beautiful promise. It's like you can take the burden that's on your shoulders and you can come up to God and you can say, here you go. You take it. You carry it. And he says, I promise

[7 : 22] I will. What about those who are struggling? Those who are going from day to day and you wake up in the morning and you think, I don't know if I can get through today and you go to bed at night worrying about everything, tense, nervous, struggling and feeling like you're failing. Psalm 145 verse 18 gives us a beautiful promise. It says, the Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. And so you might feel that your struggles and your failings make you unworthy of God and yet that promise is telling you that you talk to God about it and he promises to be near to you. He promises.

What about if you're lonely and feeling isolated? What does God promise you there? Well, he promises you in Hebrews 13 verse five, I will never leave you, not forsake you. Never. What about if you are feeling weak, weak in your body, weak in your mind, weak in your confidence, weak in your faith? What does God promise you? He says, my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness. What about if your sins are heavy on your shoulders? What if you are conscious, so deeply conscious of the fact that you have sinned against God and it is like a burden that is pressing down on you and eating away at you and bringing you down. What does God promise you? Well, he says, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

That is a promise. It's one of the most precious promises of the Bible. If we confess our sins, he promises to forgive us. And so whether you are weak, burdened, lonely, struggling, isolated, conscious of your sin, the Bible has promises for you. And last of all, we have a promise for everyone, no matter what your circumstances. God says, these are the words of Jesus, whoever comes to me, I will never cast out. Whoever comes. And the faithfulness of God tells us that he will always keep every one of those promises. And it's important to remember that that is not a question of how you feel, because our feelings can so often deceive us, can't they? Our feelings can discourage us and leave us feeling far from God. But these promises have nothing, nothing to do with your feelings. These are a case of theological truth. When God makes a promise, he keeps us. So as you go through life, don't listen to your feelings. Listen to the promises of God. And a clear example of all this is in the life of Abraham. We read about that together. In Genesis 12, God appeared to Abraham and he said to him, go from your country and from your kindred, from your father's house to the land that I'll show you and I will make of you a great nation.

I will bless you and make your name great so that you'll be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonours you. I will curse and in your families, all the nations of the in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. So God comes to Abraham and he makes a promise that he is going to make Abraham into a great nation.

[11 : 22] And that nation is going to come from Abraham's offspring. Abraham's offspring is going to be incredibly numerous. In fact, Genesis 15 says, look at, God says to Abraham, look toward heaven and number the stars if you're able to number them. Then he said to him, so shall your offspring be. Now here, God is promising Abraham that he is going to have descendants who will be a great nation. So step one of that promise is that Abraham will have a child. But that part of the promise seemed impossible. Abraham was 75 years old in Genesis 12 and his wife, Sarah, could not have children. And as you go through the life of Abraham, it just seems to be a constant catalogue of impossibilities for fulfilling

God's promise. Did you notice how many years it was between the readings? It was 25 years. So God comes in Genesis 12 with a promise. It is 25 years before step one happens. And yet now we can look back and we can see that God was faithful to everything that he promised Abraham. We often want an instant answer from God, but the Bible makes it very clear that it doesn't always work out like that. In Abraham's life, God made him promises. And despite how impossible it all

seemed, every one of them was kept. So God's promises show that he's faithful in what he says. But we have to also remember that God's faithfulness is also a warning to us because in exactly the same way that God's promises will always be kept, so too God will be faithful to what he tells us in his law. And Paul highlights this for us in Galatians chapter six. He says, Do not be deceived. God is not mocked for whatever one sows that he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will flump from the flesh reap corruption. But the one who sows to the spirit will from the spirit reap eternal life. Now here we see that God is faithful to the law of sowing and reaping. And we all know that that applies in nature. If you sow potatoes in your garden, you are never going to harvest carrots. What you sow, you will reap. And that applies spiritually. If we live our lives in a way that just treats God with contempt, if we live in our lives in a way that just thinks that we don't need to listen to what God says and we can do what we like, then we will reap what we sow. Because God is faithful in what he promises, God is faithful in what he warns. And God forbid that any of us make the mistake of thinking that we can live our lives as if our relationship with God doesn't matter. God forbid that we make that mistake. So God is faithful in what he says. Secondly, God is faithful in his relationships. And this is the great truth that is emphasised in the history of the Old Testament. We read in Genesis chapter 12 where God entered into a covenant relationship with Abraham and with his descendants. And these descendants are the people who eventually became known as the nation of Israel. Remember Israel is simply another name for Jacob who was Abraham's grandson. So Abraham is this key figure in Genesis 12. He had a son called Isaac. Isaac had a son called Jacob. Jacob was given another name by God, that name Israel. And from that point, the descendants of that family grew into a great nation, the nation of Israel. It was a big family nation, as we have often said. And so here we see that God is entering into a covenant relationship with people. And this is the beginning of a wider covenant relationship with believers that we call the covenant of grace, which is simply where God is coming to rescue us from sin. He is coming with promises through which we will be saved from our sins. A great covenant that works right through the whole of the Bible. And it's summed up by the phrase, God will be our God and we shall be his people.

[16:48] This covenant relationship between God and us. And so that's the framework in which the Old Testament works and it's pointing towards its fulfillment in the New Testament. So that's the basic pattern of the Old Testament. God enters a covenant with Abraham. That Abraham then has descendants, which becomes a nation. It's all still part of this covenant relationship that goes through the history of the Old Testament. Now, throughout the Old Testament, we see two things happening again and again and again. First of all, Israel is unfaithful to that covenant. And that's something we see from the beginning of the nation of Israel right through to the end of the Old Testament. Judges, this is the early part of the history of the nation of Israel. They've come out of Egypt. They've entered into the Promised Land. This is the early stages of things. What do we find? The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Bales, that was the foreign gods. And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods and from among the gods of the peoples who were around them and bowed down to them and they provoked the Lord to anger. So not long after they came out of

Egypt, they turned away from God. They were unfaithful. Now, 2 Chronicles 36 is chronologically right near the very end of the Old Testament, certainly near the very end of Israel's occupation of the land of Judah. All the officers of the priests and of the people likewise went exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations and they polluted the house of the Lord that he had made holy in Jerusalem. And so Israel is notoriously unfaithful in the Old Testament. They're constantly being drawn away from God by the attractions of the world around them, just like we are, drawn away from God by everything in the world that was appealing. And when you go home, you can read Ezekiel chapter 16 and it kind of summarizes it in very, very vivid language and it uses the image of a husband and a wife to describe Israel's behavior and it labels Israel as an adulterous wife and does even worse, adulterous wife, an adulterous wife who receives strangers instead of her husband. And so that's what Israel was like again and again and again. They were unfaithful.

Now, I love my diagrams and so I put a diagram for you, a graph in fact for you to describe this. So here we have Old Testament history running from left to right as you are looking at it. And you've got a line in the middle that's supposed to be the zero point if you look like below it is unfaithfulness,

above it is faithfulness. What does Israel's history look like in the Old Testament? Well, we can see it is a constant up and down and up and down, but gradually getting worse and worse and worse. There were some high points. Abraham was a high point. God came to Abraham and Abraham, although he himself made many mistakes, it was on the whole a time of faithfulness. But very quickly things descended because not long after Abraham's grandson, Jacob had died by that point, Israel were in Egypt and in Egypt, they fell away from being faithful to God, Egypt. I always remember when the people of Israel were in Egypt, they weren't worshiping God as a faithful nation in Egypt.

They were doing what the Egyptians did. They were no better. God did not redeem them because of their goodness because that's never how salvation works. So Egypt low point. Then there was maybe a higher point where there's the Exodus and things with Moses looking a wee bit better. But as we read in Judges, not long after Moses died, they went right downhill again. Then there was a wee bit of an improvement with David. David was a great king and things improved a little bit under David. But then in David's son, Solomon, things started to go wrong. In David's grandson, Rehoboam, things went terribly wrong. And from there on, you read through first king, second kings, it's just down. Well, a wee bit of an improvement here and there with some good kings like Hezekiah and Josiah. There was some slight improvement, but on the whole, down, down, down, down, down. Israel was unfaithful.

But if you look at Old Testament history, what does God like? Israel was unfaithful, but God is always utterly faithful. That's God's faithfulness. Now notice something really important. There is no tit for tat with God. Isn't that how we tend to react to things?

[22 : 27] Somebody hurts us, so we hurt them back. Somebody's unfaithful to us, so we're unfaithful to them. Somebody talks about us, so we talk about them. And we tend to go down to their level. God never, ever went down to Israel's level. He was faithful because, as I said, if you read Ezekiel chapter 16, you'll get a very, very vivid, very vivid summary of Israel's behaviour. But do you know what it says at the end of that chapter? Thus says the Lord God, I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath and breaking the covenant, yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant. And so even though Israel let God down and God had to deal with them in accordance with what he warned them, he warned them that things would go wrong for them if they carried on and they didn't listen and he had to be faithful to what he warned them, yet he never abandoned his covenant. He was constantly faithful. And that's seen throughout the history of the Old Testament because if you look,

God faithfully taught the people. They came out of Egypt so he gives Moses instructions as to how the people should live. He didn't just say, okay, now you're out of Egypt, just get on with it yourself. He gave them detailed instructions in the book of Exodus, Leviticus, laws that would teach them how to live, to keep them right, to keep them safe. So God faithfully taught them and yet they still turned away from them. God faithfully provided for them. He gave them blessings and under David they had riches and splendour and especially under Solomon things were really good for the nation and yet they turned away from them.

He faithfully warned them. That was one of the reasons why he sent the prophets. If you look at the prophets in the Old Testament, they're like warning men. They're coming with words of warning again and again. They're saying, don't do this. Don't turn away from God because it's only going to lead to trouble. And all of these things were an expression of God's faithfulness. Look at, if you look at that, everything went down in Egypt and that could have been the end of the story. But yet all of the upward points in the graph are because God was faithful and providing for them, warning them and he constantly called them and waited for them to repent. Isaiah 55 verse 6, seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him return to the Lord that he may have compassion on him and to our God for he will abundantly pardon. Now, Isaiah was a prophet at one of the low points in that graph. And yet that's what he's saying, return to the Lord and he will abundantly pardon. And so in the Old Testament, we see God's faithfulness is constant. But the Old Testament is always the shadow. It's always pointing forward. And even though God's faithfulness is astonishing in the Old Testament, in the new, it is only going to go to an even greater level. Because in the New Testament, we see God's covenant promises fulfilled in the salvation that comes through the Persian and work of Jesus Christ. Because there you don't just have a God who

is waiting for his people to return. You have a God who gives himself so that they might be saved. And so that is why if you trust in Jesus, you will enter a relationship with a God of absolute faithfulness. Because God is always faithful. That means that God will always be loyal to you. He will always be trustworthy. He will always be dependable.

And that has so much comfort for us because do you ever feel ashamed of yourself? Do you ever feel ashamed of yourself? Well, God's faithfulness tells you that he will never be ashamed of you. Do you feel that you are stumbling as a Christian? Maybe even in the last week you felt that you've stumbled and made mistakes. God's faithfulness tells us that he will always, always help you up again. God never lets go of your hand, ever. Do you ever feel that you are an inconvenience to God? That you are not worthy of his time and that your prayers aren't worth him listening to? Well, God's faithfulness tells you that you are never, ever too much trouble for God. Ever. God is faithful in his relationships.

[28 : 12] Early and finally, God is faithful in his thinking. He's faithful in what he says, faithful in his relationships, but he's also faithful in his attitude in terms of how he thinks.

And of course, that makes sense because his actions arise from his inward disposition. And the whole of the Gospel message is dependent on the fact that God has a faithful mindset. Humanity has sinned against God. We have sinned against God. We have given God every reason to pass us by and forget about that, forget about us. But he doesn't. He is faithful.

He is committed. He is loyal. And God himself, Father, Son and Spirit, have worked together, have covenanted together to save us, to rescue us. That was what we read at the very beginning.

And we know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations.

[29 : 17] We are part of that thousand generations, aren't we? And we know that that promises through because God has been faithful to us just as he was to his people all the way back in the days of Deuteronomy. And this is why there is a permanence about the Christian faith.

That's one of the glorious truths emphasized by our theology. Once justified, always justified. Once regenerated, always regenerated. Once adopted, always adopted. Once indwelt by the Holy Spirit, always indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The saints persevere all because God is faithful. That's why Christ saves us to the uttermost. That's why if you come to trust in Jesus today, it's permanent. The burden is off your shoulders forever, forever, because it's permanent. And that permanence arises from the faithfulness of God. And this has really important implications for us in terms of a problem that I'm sure we all face from time to time. And that is the problem of doubt. Do Christians doubt? Yes, they do.

Do ministers doubt? Yes, they do. Often we doubt. Often we are worried. Often we are unsure. And it's not unusual for us to be plagued by the question, what if? Is that a question that plagues you? What if I make a mistake as a Christian? What if I let God down or let the church down or let my fellow Christians down? What if I make a mistake? What if I can't keep going? What if I start living an outwardly professing Christian life? What if I can't keep it up? What if I fail? What if I stumble? What if things get on top of me? What if it's too much for me? What if I can't keep going? What if God gives me a job to do? Whatever it may be, maybe in the church or maybe in the community where I'm serving, whatever. What if I can't manage it? What if I'm confronted by something awful in my life? What if I face illness that I never thought? What if I get too scared? What if I suffer a loss that I can't bear? What if something like that happens and I can't cope? What if I'm not strong enough to be a Christian? What if I'm not good enough? What if I am not able to be what I want to be? What if my faith wobbles and falters? There is one answer to all of these questions. God is faithful. God is faithful in all of these situations.

And whatever your doubts are, whatever your what-ifs are, the answer is just three words. God is faithful. And there are some remarkable verses in 2 Timothy that prove this, confirm this. It says, here's a trustworthy saying, if we've died with him, we will live with him. So there's a great expression of our union with Christ. We died with Christ, we raised with him. If we endure, we will reign with him. Again, that makes sense, doesn't it? If we persevere, we will reign with him. That's the promise of God that we will share in his glory in heaven. If we deny him, he will deny us. That, of course, is true. Those who have no faith, no interest in God, he cannot acknowledge them as his people because they are not his people. If they deny him, he will deny us. Then it says, if we are faithless, what will he do? So if your faith wobbles and struggles, if you make mistakes as a Christian, if you're faithless, if you mop up as a Christian, we would expect it to say, if you are

faithless, God will be unfaithful to you back. But that's not what says, is it? If we are faithless, he remains faithful because he cannot deny himself, you are his. Now that's not an excuse to sin. It is a reason to fall on our knees and thank

[34 : 31] God for his faithfulness. And if we hold on to the faithfulness of God, we will no longer be plagued by the what-ifs of life. And if you are here today and you want to be a Christian, or maybe you're not sure if you're a Christian and you are struggling with what-ifs or doubts and uncertainties, then you need to just listen to what God is saying to you. God is saying to you, I will always be faithful to you. God will always be faithful to you. And when we become a Christian, we are simply putting our faith in God's faithfulness. Now please make sure you grasp that. You're not putting faith in your own faithfulness and your own ability to be whatever. You are putting your faith in God's faithfulness. You can become a Christian today, not because you are faithful or because you will be faithful, but because

God is faithful. And God is always faithful. That is the rock that we all need to build our lives on. God is faithful. Thank God that He is faithful. Amen. Let's pray.

God our Father, we thank you for your faithfulness, your faithfulness that has been shown through the generations to many, many people. And here we are, thousands of generations later, and you are still faithful. And we pray, O Lord, that we would always rest on the faithfulness of our God. Help us, Lord, just to trust in you and to lean on you. And thank you, God, that you are so perfectly faithful. Amen.