



Believe

STORIES OF FAITH
FROM FATHER ABRAHAM

PART 2

WRITTEN BY DR. STEVE JONES

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.

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LESSON 5 | ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD

GENESIS 15:1-6

If you say the phrase, “Calm before the storm,” everyone knows what you are talking about. When you know something big is coming and you get ready, there is this moment where you have done all you can and are just waiting for the thing to happen. You see the peace but realize it won’t last long.

But there needs to be a phrase for the eerie calm that follows making a momentous choice. There is a moment after you have made what you realize is a huge, life-changing decision that you sit there in the calm before all the consequences of your choice come flooding in, and you say to yourself, “What did I just do?” We experienced it in a wide variety of circumstances. When we end a relationship or when we get married. When we quit a job or take a new one, even when we have tried to make the best possible decision, and even when we believe we have chosen well, there is this moment after the decision is made that we sit there and wonder if we really did the right thing.

We need a word for this to let people know it is coming. After we have chosen to stand with God, the enemy whispers in our ears and asks if we are sure we did the right thing. Maybe there is still time to undo it. The story of Abraham is the story of God calling him into an unknown world. It’s an invitation to believe God and not his fears. He must choose repeatedly to lean into what God has told him and not what the world or his own worries are telling him. That is the life God calls us into as well. God knows it’s hard, but like a coach, He keeps putting us in situations where we must choose. He picks us up when we fail. He also strengthens us when we are doubting our choice.

That is what we are going to look at today. God meets Abraham in the aftermath of Abraham choosing well and strengthens him for the journey ahead. Hopefully, as we study this passage, we will be reminded that following God is hard work sometimes, that it’s okay to struggle, and that we can rely on God to give us what we need to keep going.

God Addresses Abraham’s Fear (v1)

Genesis 15 is an important chapter. It contains the story of God making an official covenant with Abraham. God is about to show how deep his commitment to Abraham is

by taking an oath to demonstrate His commitment to Abraham. We will look closer at the covenant next week. Today we are going to study what happens right before God makes the covenant.

The covenant passage is so important that we forget what has just happened. The last couple of chapters have shown Abraham accepting the call, then following, the failing, then getting back on track. In chapter 14, Abraham rescued Lot from some enemy kings, tithed to Melchizedek, and refused the wealth of the king of Sodom as payment.

Imagine Abraham back in his tent. If I were him, I would be sitting there thinking, “What have I done?” He now has some powerful enemies headed his way. He now has less money than when he started. Perhaps he is wondering, “Why did I get involved?”, “Why couldn’t I have let Lot figure it all out on his own? Or maybe, “Why couldn’t I have kept just a little bit of the loot for myself?”

That is the Abraham that God is talking to as Genesis 15 starts. God evidently knows what Abraham is worried about because God takes the initiative and reaffirms His protection of Abraham. Verse 1 says, “After these things, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.”

God tells Abraham not to fear. He then promises to protect him and to provide for him. This clearly indicates that the concerns of Chapter 14 were on Abraham’s mind. God knows what Abraham is worried about and wondering about. He doesn’t leave Abraham to sort it out on his own. He meets him and reassures him that he made the right choice.

This shows us that God knows we have fears. “Do not fear” is the most frequent command in Scripture. God says it not because he is frustrated by our fears but because He knows that fear is the opposite of faith. Living in faith means choosing to believe God and not your fears. To help us, he repeats, he reminds, he reaffirms. This repetition is how God can remind us that He knows it’s an issue and encourages us to keep choosing Him over our fears. That is why Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:14, “Remind them of these things.”

One lie that sin tells us is that we are on our own. If we don’t take care of ourselves, no one will. Sin then lies to us that we must do some seemingly insignificant bad thing to make sure we are secure. God reminds us, as He does Abraham, that we are not alone and that we can trust Him to protect us and provide for us.

God Answers Abraham's Question (v2-5)

In addition to facing our fears, faith requires us to voice our questions. Anytime someone tells us to trust them, questions immediately come up that we are worried they haven't considered. That is what happens to Abraham. He is learning to believe God. God has just promised to protect and provide for him. This leads Abraham to ask a couple of questions. In verse 2, he poses the question, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I [c]am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" In verse 3, he clarifies his concern, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir."

Many people think that when God changes our plans, our job is to Stoically accept whatever he sends down the pike. Nothing could be further from the truth. Abraham's response reveals that it is okay to ask questions. It's okay for a couple of reasons.

First, asking questions is okay because it reveals we are trying to internalize God's word by seeking to understand it. We notice problems and start wrestling with making sense of what it means. I am not talking about stewing on something or anxiously trying to figure out a way out, but thoughtfully mulling over what is going on and how this can be the work of a good God. Wrestling means engaging with God and using our whole selves. When we wrestle with things, or ourselves, or with God, we are putting ourselves in motion, and it gives God an opportunity to move us, change us, and direct us down the path He has for us and wants us to see.

It's also okay to ask questions because it reminds us that God desires to interact with us. We pay lip service to this with phrases like "having a relationship with God." However, our lives look like we believe our job is to receive orders from God and do what we are told.

Don't run from the areas where you have doubts, questions, or uncertainty. Those are the areas where God is trying to mature your understanding and show you more of who He is. We say God is personal and wants a relationship with us. But we live functionally like we don't expect it. Wrestling with hard things is an excellent way to interact with God. To voice questions, mull things over, and ask God for answers. Asking questions puts the ball back in God's court. Ask, keep asking, and see if God doesn't answer. The Bible is full of promises that if we call to God, He will answer. When we ask questions, we give Him the chance to do so.

That is what God does for Abraham. First, God answers his question. Verse 4, "When behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but

one who will come forth from your own [h]body, he shall be your heir.” Second, God reaffirms his plan to Abraham. Verse 5 says, “And He took him outside and said, ‘Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ And He said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’” God tells Abraham to count the stars and expect his descendants to be just as numerous.

God Approves of Abraham’s Response (v6)

Undoubtedly, God’s answer to Abraham raised more questions about “How?” Frustratingly, God rarely answers the how questions. This is where faith kicks in. God has shown Abraham that he understands his fears, worries, and concerns. He has factored them into his plan. He knows Abraham’s lack of kids hinders the plan’s fulfillment. He tells Abraham that the plan is still for him to have numerous descendants.

Now Abraham has a choice. Does he believe his fears, worries, and concerns, or does he accept that God knows the issues and has factored their solution into his plan? Verse 6 says, “Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.”

The last phrase of verse 6 is essential. Righteousness is a common biblical word. The short definition means “to be right.” When we think we can be right on our own, we become self-righteous like the Pharisees in the New Testament. The better Bible definition means “to be in right relationship.” The Bible’s message is that we cannot be right on our own. We need to be in right relationship with the one who is. “To be righteous” means “To be in right relationship with God.” And what does it take to be in right relationship with God... it means to believe what He says. So, when the verse ends with “He reckoned it to him as righteousness,” it means that God counted Abraham’s belief as the primary response that God wanted from him. It is also the primary response God wants from us. The question is...do we?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Chapter 14 connect with this chapter? What has Abraham risked by rescuing Lot and refusing the king of Sodom? What fears might he be facing? Have you ever been in a similar situation?
2. Who takes the initiative in dealing with Abraham’s fears? What does God promise Him? What promises of God help you remember not to fear but to trust God?
3. How are faith and fear related? What is the difference? What makes us choose fear over faith?

4. What does Abraham's question show us about our own interactions with God? Have you ever not felt free to question something? Why does God invite us to wrestle with him?

5. What does the phrase "He reckoned it to him as righteousness?" What does it mean to be righteous? What does Abraham do to be declared righteous by God?

LESSON 6 | GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

GENESIS 15:7-21

Have you ever heard somebody say, “It’s just a ceremony?” It’s usually said in protest about having to get dressed up in uncomfortable clothes and sit through something long and tedious like someone else’s graduation. But the truth is that we don’t take ceremonies seriously anymore. For us, it is the legally binding contracts and pieces of paper that are signed that we take seriously. For many, graduation is a pointless ceremony. It is the transcript that verifies that you have graduated. For many, even a wedding is not what makes you married. Some people see the signed marriage license as what makes you married.

I had to decide for myself what I actually believed about this on my own wedding day, about 30 minutes before the ceremony. I verified with my best man that he had the rings and the marriage license. He shows me the rings, then pulls out the marriage license from his jacket pocket. He looks at it, mumbles something like “hmp” to himself, then says, “I’m sure you already know this, but your future wife’s name is misspelled.”

I grabbed the document out of his hand, and sure enough, a letter was missing from my future wife’s first name. I then realized we were leaving on our honeymoon before the courthouse opened for business on Monday. So there was a chance that I wouldn’t be able to get a new, correct, marriage license for several weeks. I had to ask myself, “What makes me married?” Is it the piece of paper, or is it the ceremony?

The ancients didn’t have this problem. Before courtrooms and contract lawyers, the ceremony WAS the piece of paper. It was a performance in which both parties demonstrated that they understood the seriousness of the agreement they were making. Both parties would give tangible assurance of their willingness to keep their end of the agreement and offer some consequence that would happen to them if they proved false.

Today we are going to look at one such agreement made between God and Abraham. In Chapter 15, God has been reminding Abraham of His promises and plan to give him the land he resides in. Abraham responds in verse 8 by asking, “O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?”

What follows is not God telling Abraham to “have faith.” Instead, God makes a covenant with Abraham. This so-called “Abrahamic Covenant” is what we are going to look at today. God performs a ceremony in which He makes a formal agreement with Abraham. He does this to show Abraham that He can be trusted to do what He says. As we look at this, may our own faith in God’s promises be renewed as we realize that God’s promises aren’t the casual, off-hand comments of a distracted deity but instead the formal and intentional choices of a God who is at work in us and through us to accomplish His great plan of redemption.

God Creates the Covenant (v7)

Though Abraham’s question is found in verse 8, the passage, and the covenant, start in verse 7. God tells Abraham, “I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it.” In saying to Abraham, He binds Himself by making a promise. He grounds His promise in His character and in His past actions. This is who I am. This is what I have already done. You can trust me to do the rest.

This is an important reminder. Sometimes, when doubting, we need to be reminded of who God is and what He has already done. I remember talking with a friend and mentor about some problems I was having. As I recounted to him how I ended up in this predicament, I saw God’s hand and provision the whole way. Though I couldn’t see God’s hand at work at that moment, I was reassured that He had been leading. It gave me the faith to believe that He was still leading and would continue to lead.

God Cuts the Covenant (v8-11)

We can, perhaps, cut Abraham some slack for asking in verse 8, “O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?” He didn’t have the whole Bible like we did. He had a God who called him out of everything he had ever known, a God who had appeared to him several times and led him to a new land. So God doesn’t respond with, “You just gotta believe.” God gives to Abraham, and through Abraham to us, a picture of His commitment to plan and His faithfulness to his people by making a covenant with Abraham.

The covenant starts with God asking Abraham to bring some animals. Verse 9 says, “So He said to him, ‘Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, and a three-year-old female goat, and a three-year-old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon.’” These are Abraham’s only contributions to the covenant. Some have noticed that the offerings listed here correspond to later sacrifices in temple worship. The most important thing to notice is that “three years old” is when an animal has the most value to a farmer. He is asking Abraham to bring some very valuable things as offerings. He is asking Abraham, “How bad do you want to know?”

Verse 10 contains Abraham's response: "Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds." It may sound odd, but this was standard operating procedure for making a covenant in the ancient world. You would cut an animal in half, then the parties making the agreement would pass between the two halves of the animal as a symbolical statement of "may what happened to this animal happen to me if I break this covenant." This was so foundational to making covenants that in ancient Hebrew, you don't "make" a covenant; you "cut" a covenant. Even later, when no cutting was involved, they still used the phrase "to cut a covenant."

God is giving Abraham a powerful picture of the fact that His word can be trusted. God will do what He has promised.

God Clarifies the Covenant (v11-16)

After Abraham prepares the sacrifice, bad things start happening. Verse 11 says, "The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away." While Abraham waits for God to do whatever He is going to, birds of prey swoop down and start trying to pick at the sacrifice. This is not a good sign in anybody's book. If you are waiting on God to guarantee his promises, this is not the sign you want to see. But this is part of the symbolism. Verse 12 says, "Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram." While asleep, God appears to Abraham, reinforcing his promise and clarifying it by giving extra details.

God promises that it won't be easy. In verse 13, God says, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years." Those are hardly comforting words. Especially if you are expecting God to do something soon. Sometimes that is the cost of clarity. Sometimes knowing can be a little depressing when you realize that fulfillment won't happen as soon as you want. But it does remind us that God isn't shocked by the ups and downs of life. Those things won't defeat His plan. God is playing the long game. He calls us to trust Him even when it is hard because the hard parts are still part of His plan. In verse 14, he says, "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions." God will use the time in slavery to grow the nation and bless them with many possessions.

God also promises it won't be chaos. Sometimes, we think we have to wait until everything is set right before we will be able to enjoy our lives. That is not the case at all. God does promise to set things right. But he also promises us peace in the midst of problems. In verse 15, God tells Abraham, "As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age." Abraham was told he wouldn't live to see

the fulfillment of all God's promises, but that wouldn't mean he wouldn't have a good life. No, he would be blessed in this life and die in peace. The same is true of us as well. We won't see God fix all the problems in our lives. But we will, as Psalm 27:13 says, "see the goodness of the LORD In the land of the living."

Last, God promises it won't be unfair. The first place he says this is in verse 14, where it says that he "will also judge the nation whom they will serve." This means that even though slavery is part of God's plan, it doesn't mean that those who enforced the slavery will avoid consequences. But verse 16 is the more critical verse. It says, "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." One of the reasons the promise will take a while to be fulfilled is because other people still occupy the land God promised to Abraham. God giving the land to Abraham is not just a blessing to him and his descendants but also a judgment on the sin of the current inhabitants. Amorites were the most populous group in Canaan, so they stand here as the representative of all the Canaanite nations. One reason God waits to fulfill this promise to Abraham is because he is patient with the Amorites.

God Completes the Covenant (v17-21)

It doesn't matter if you draw up accurate contracts; without signatures, they don't matter. The same is true with covenants. You can schedule a wedding, rent a tux, and invite guests, but nothing has happened until you walk down the aisle and give your vow. God has declared his promise. God has cut the covenant. God has revealed aspects of his plan that were previously unknown. Finally, he appears to Abraham and "signs his name" to the covenant.

Verse 17 says, "It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces." God appears to Abraham as a pillar of smoke and a pillar of fire, the same way he guides the Hebrews when they leave slavery in Egypt. Both smoke and fire represent God's presence but also His transcendence. You can see smoke, but you can't see through smoke. You can see fire, but you can't approach it. The same is true with God. He is present with us to lead and guide. Like smoke, His ways are impenetrable to human reason. Like fire, His character is holy and forces us to keep a respectful distance.

As a pillar of smoke and fire, God passes through the cut pieces of the sacrifices, symbolizing his commitment to keeping the covenant. Many people focus on the exact dimensions of the land that God promises to give Abraham. But this promise was just the beginning. In Psalm 2:8, God tells the Messiah, "Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, And the very ends of the earth as Your possession." Habakkuk 2:14 says, "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of

the LORD, As the waters cover the sea.” In the same way that God’s plan was to call Abraham and, through Abraham, to call all men back to him, so too, the land that God promised Abraham was the beginning of the promise God made to reclaim for Himself the entirety of His good but fallen creation.

More important than the promise of land is the fact that Abraham doesn’t do anything but sleep through the covenant-making. Abraham doesn’t pass through the pieces. God has made a one-sided covenant with Abraham. He has declared His commitment to keep His word to Abraham no matter what.

CONCLUSION

The Abrahamic covenant is more than just a piece of Bible knowledge to add to our brains. It is an important insight into who God is and what He is doing in the world. Like Abraham, we can learn from this Covenant that we can take God at His word, believe Him, and respond with obedience. This passage shows us why we can trust God’s promises.

1. God’s Promises are Grounded in His Character – God’s promises reveal who He is and what He is up to in the world. Because of that, we learn that we can trust God’s promises because of who God is. This reminds us that when we don’t know what is happening or what we should do, we should fall back on what we know of God’s character.

2. God’s Promises are Guarded by His Commitment – God’s promises aren’t proof we will never encounter hardships. Rather, they are just the opposite. God makes promises because He knows we will be tempted to wonder what is happening. In the midst of trials and temptations, we can trust God’s promises because He guards them by his commitment to us. His promise isn’t empty words or idle threats. They are proof that He is committed to us.

3. God’s Promises are Guaranteed by His Choice – Some people love to argue about whether God chooses us or we choose God. The fact is the Bible clearly teaches both. The more significant fact is these truths answer different questions. If you are asking about how you should live your life, the biblical answer isn’t “it doesn’t matter. It only matters what God chooses.” That is the place to hear “choose God.” We all have a choice in life, choose to follow God. But if you are worried you have let God down, failed too many times, or are a disappointment, that is the place to hear, “You are a chosen child of God.” God’s choice doesn’t trump our choice. It answers the worry that God will abandon us when we fail. It doesn’t excuse our sin. It just shows us that God factored our sin and stupidity into His plan when He wrote the plan for our lives. You are not an accident or an afterthought. You are chosen and desired child of God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What does it mean to “Cut” a covenant? What was involved? What did it represent?
2. What information does God give Abraham to clarify the nature of His covenant? What do we learn about the character of God through it?
3. How does God reveal himself to Abraham? What does this reveal about the character of God?
4. What gives you the confidence to believe? When you doubt, what helps you trust God’s promises more?
5. How does this passage illustrate a “one-sided covenant?” What does this reveal about the nature of God’s choice?

LESSON 7 | HAGAR AND SARAH'S BAD PLAN

GENESIS 16

Everyone should be required to work in the food service industry at some point in their lives. I don't know what it is, but ordering food in public brings out the worst in some people. Because of that, I believe you should also be able to be sentenced to serve in the food service industry as punishment for crimes committed against the food service industry.

My tenure in the food service industry was served in a sandwich shop while I was in college. Most people try to be gracious and accommodating. I remember one time I made a mistake on a man's sandwich. When I offered to remake the sandwich, he declined, took his sandwich, and remarked that it was still an A+ sandwich, even with the mistake. But every now and then, you get people who make you forget about all the nice people.

I remember one time I was at the station whose job was finishing the sandwich and delivering it to the customers. While I was looking down at the cutting board with a long knife in my hand, a patron, without getting my attention first, tossed a basket over the counter at me. He then shouted, "I ordered it without tomatoes." I had been prepared for people like that, so I mumbled an apology and promised to get right on it after I finished the sandwich in front of me. I assumed he had returned the sandwich because he wanted me to remake it. So, I took a couple of minutes and did just that. When I returned it to him, he responded snarkily, "How did it take so long to remove a couple of tomatoes?" I told him I remade the sandwich because I figured he wanted me to do more than something he could have done at the table with only a minor inconvenience. I walked behind the counter and stood there baffled for a few seconds. How could a person love pointing out another's mistake so much that they would choose to do it even when it meant another person touching their food again?

A wise person once said, "People complain because they are worried about being overlooked." Knowing that helps me when dealing with people who are complaining. They aren't primarily mad; they are worried they aren't seen. They are getting mad to make sure they are seen. We all worry that we are being overlooked. Some people insist on their way. Some quietly slink back into the background. Some try to run away.

We do this with God too. A primary temptation to sin comes from a fear that God doesn't see, know, or care about what is happening to us. We worry that we won't have what we need, so we take matters into our own hands instead of continuing to believe that God is faithful to his promises.

Today we are going to look at a story in the like of Abraham where his wife starts worrying that God won't fulfill his promises. And when she starts worrying, she starts trying to do God's work for Him. She ends up causing many problems for her, her husband, and others. It is God who puts the story back on track and reveals that he is El-Roi, "The God who sees." As we study this passage, may we realize how we react when we worry that we are overlooked or forgotten, and may we learn to believe that God does see, hear, and know precisely what is going on.

Sarah's Flawed Plan (v1-3)

Chapter 16 starts by stating the problem that will be at the core of this lesson. Verse 1a says, "Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children." She didn't doubt God's promise. She just didn't see how it would be fulfilled through her. She was getting older and passed the point of being able to bear children. She couldn't see how God would fulfill His promise, so she took matters into her own hands.

The rest of the verse gives us the other main character of this episode. Verse 1b says, "She had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar." This is the first mention of Hagar. She was probably added to Abraham's household while in Egypt, perhaps while Sarah was in Pharaoh's household.

Before we look at Sarah's plan, notice what she says at the beginning of verse 2: "Sarai said to Abram, "Now behold, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children." Sarah is mad at God for her predicament. God made a promise to her husband. Now, she accuses God of excluding her from being a part of the fulfillment of that promise.

Sarah proposes the idea of Abraham conceiving a child Hagar. Because Hagar was a part of Abraham's household, and Sarah was the head wife of that household, the child would still "count" towards her and enable her to, as the end of verse 2 says, "obtain children through her." The plan might sound farfetched or even scandalous to our ears. However, it was an accepted cultural practice in that area, even if it goes against God's ideal for marriage and, as we will see, against God's promise to Abraham.

What drove Sarah to develop a plan to put another woman in her marital bed? The start of Verse 3 gives us the answer, "After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan..." Ten years had passed since they came back from Egypt. A lot has happened, except for

what God promised would happen. Abraham and Sarah were already older than most new parents. Now they had been waiting on God for an additional decade. The fear finally got to her, and she decided to take matters into her own hand and do God's work for him.

Sarah's Failed Plan (v4-6)

Her plan works. But in working, it ends up wrecking everyone's life. What happens next is a textbook example of how sin works itself out in our lives. Each of these people involved shows different aspects of how sin manifests itself.

Hagar demonstrates false pride. Verse 4 says, "When she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight." In many societies, the ability to bear children is a significant marker for defining womanhood. In the same way that Sarah felt like she was failing as a woman for being unable to conceive, Hagar now looks down on Sarah for the same thing. Hagar has done what Sarah could not, so she feels superior to Sarah. We all do this. We all seek significance by elevating ourselves over others. We long and crave significance. Sin lies to us and says we will find it in what 1 John 2:16 calls "the boastful pride of life."

Sarah exhibits false blame. Sarah comes to Abraham and complains in verse 4, "May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the LORD judge between you and me." What seemed to Sarah and Abraham like a reasonable, permissible, and expedient solution to their problem turns out to compound it. What was supposed to bring them closer together and closer to God's plan is now dividing them. This is also a manifestation of sin. When our fear-filled plans collapse, we look for someone besides ourselves to blame. Here, Sarah blames Abraham even though the whole plan was her idea. She calls for justice, but the truth is that she was using Hagar to elevate herself, and when it didn't work, she is mad and hates Hagar. Proof of this is in verse 6b when it says that Sarah treated Hagar harshly once permitted to do so. Sarah felt the frustration of having her plan fail, but instead of confession, repentance, and humility, she chose to lash out and blame everyone except herself.

Abraham adopts false neutrality. He should be working to resolve the conflict and protect his wife and the woman who is the mother of his children. But he doesn't want to get involved, even though he is at the center of the problem. In verse 6, he tells Sarah, "Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight." Abraham tells Sarah she can do whatever she wants. Abraham wants out of the situation as much as possible. Again, this is a common reaction to sin. When sinful plans collapse, instead of taking responsibility and assisting in supporting and reconciling, many people run for the

exit door as fast as possible or wash their hands of any involvement. We should wash our hands of any continued sinful activity. But shirking the responsibility of dealing with the aftermath of our sinful choices is itself a sinful choice. That is what Abraham does. It causes Sarah to bully Hagar even more. And it causes Hagar to run away....into the desert...pregnant... with what they all think might be the promised child.

Sarah's Fixed Plan (7-12)

The first six verses of this chapter tell a far too familiar story that we all can relate to. We take matters into our own hands, do what we think God should do, then end up making a massive train wreck out of everything. If God were like us, he would s leave us to sort out our own mess, rub our noses in it, or find someone else to use. But God does none of these. At this point, God intervenes to show that He hasn't forgotten, he hasn't abandoned, and he has a plan. In the rest of the chapter, God shows He handles the messes we make in our sins.

God Gives Chase (v7-8) – Verse 7 contains a detail we often overlook as a narrative description. It says, “Now the angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur.” Hagar was running home. The Spring on the way to Shur is a caravan stop on the way back to Egypt, where Hagar was from. In fact, Hagar might not be her real name. In Hebrew, Hagar means “flight.” Her name literally means “runaway.”

What I love is that it says the angel of the Lord found her. It is essential to underscore that when the Old Testament says, “angel of the Lord,” it doesn't mean one of the Lord's angels. It means the physical manifestation of the unseen God. Abraham and Sarah might have let Hagar run away, but God doesn't. He goes looking for her. He chases her down. That is the story of salvation. When we run away, God goes looking for us. In Luke 19:10, Jesus summarizes His mission this way, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

God Gives Correction v9 – When God finds her, He gives her guidance, and that guidance is sometimes hard. When we like it, we call it guidance. When we don't, we call it correction. After Hagar tells her sob story about why she is running, she is told, “Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority.” God doesn't say, “That's not the whole story now, is it.” He simply tells her what she needs to do to fix this situation. It is two hard things: go back and submit. The first is hard enough. But submission is something that doesn't come easy for anyone. It means intentionally choosing to allow someone else to have the last word and to have the final say on what you do. It means surrendering the idea of trying to “get your own way.”

God Gives Confirmation v10 – When God tells us to do a hard thing, it is easy to think we are being punished or condemned. But condemnation doesn't come from God. God tells us to do hard things, not so that we can experience hardship, but so that we can experience the joy that waits for us on the other side. After telling Hagar to return, God makes her a promise. Verse 10 says, "I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count." He says that what He is commanding her to do is in order to bless her and her descendants.

God gives Consolation v11 – God concludes his words to Hagar by offering her some words of hope and consolation. HE tells Hagar that she is bearing a son. He tells her to name him Ishmael, which means "God Hears." He then gives her a prophecy about her son. Verse 12 says, "He will be a wild donkey of a man, His hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand will be against him; and he will live to the east of all his brothers." This prophecy might sound a bit terrible to our ears, but it was words of hope to Hagar. We don't know how she ended up in slavery in Egypt, but the story we hear of her life in Abraham's household is not rosy. She must have been tired of people telling her what to do. She must have longed for freedom. She might have been worried that her son would be born into similar servitude. But God tells her that he and his descendants will be free. Wild Donkeys were chiefly known for being unable to be tamed by men. God tells Hagar that her son and his descendants will live in the freedom she longs for.

Sarah's Forgotten Plan (V13-16)

We know that God's words must have been words of hope to Hagar because she responds in gratitude by calling God v13, "You are a God who sees." This is the name of God: El-Roi. It is sometimes translated as "The God who sees me."

Hagar has learned a powerful lesson. Her life is in God's hands, not Sarah's. God uses Sarah's bad plan to achieve His own purpose. When God met her at the well in the desert, He told her that He had heard all her cries to Him, that He saw and knew where she was, and that He was at work to give her and her children what she longed for.

Hagar can forget about Sarah's plan and focus on God's plan that is coming true despite everyone's sin, including her own. She does exactly what God tells her to do. And it happens just like God said it would.

APPLICATION

We all go through times when we act similarly to all the characters in this story. Like Sarah, we become worried that God has forgotten us, so we take matters into our own hands. Like Abraham, we become exhausted with waiting and are willing to try anything,

and then when plans go astray, we sink back into dangerous passivity and neutrality. Like Hagar, when we finally get a taste of what we've always hoped for, we despise others who don't have what we do.

May we learn the lessons Hagar learns by the well in the desert. God hears our cry. God knows our situation. God sees our struggles. God is at work to achieve His purposes in our lives. May we rest in the fact that sin, either ours or other people's against us, doesn't wreck God's plan.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why was Sarah motivated to do what she did in this story? Have you ever acted with similar motivation? What would have been a better response?
2. Why was Abraham motivated to do what she did in this story? Have you ever acted with similar motivation? What would have been a better response?
3. Why was Hagar motivated to do what she did in this story? Have you ever acted with similar motivation? What would have been a better response?
4. What is the name of God that Hagar uses? What does it mean? How does it apply to our lives?
5. Have you ever made a situation worse in an attempt to fix it or do God's work for Him? What was the result? How can we learn to trust God when it is hard?

LESSON 8 | ABRAHAM LAUGHS WITH GOD

GENESIS 17

A.W. Tozer was an American pastor, preacher, and writer from the early 20th century. He is best known as the pastor of Southside Alliance Church in Chicago and the author of several books. His most famous books are *The Pursuit of God*, which Christianity Today included in its list of the top 100 books of the twentieth century, and *Knowledge of the Holy*, which is an excellent study of the attributes of God similar to (and I think better than) J.I. Packer's famous book, *Knowing God*. But in one of the numerous magazine articles he wrote, which have been subsequently collected into books, he wrote what I think might be my favorite thing by him. In *That Incredible Christian*, AW Tozer gives his 7 Rules for Self-Discovery. He says that these seven markers are indicators of the health of our soul and the direction of our lives.

A.W. Tozer's Rules for Self-Discovery:

1. What do we want most?
2. What do we think about most?
3. How do we use our money?
4. What do we do with our leisure time?
5. Whose company do we enjoy?
6. Who and what do we admire?
7. What do we laugh at?

They all are convicting and eye-opening. But number 7 really hits home. I love to laugh and consider myself to have a good sense of humor. But things I find funny are an indicator of the health of my soul.

Equally important to what we laugh at, and perhaps related to it, is the question of how we laugh. People laugh for different reasons. Laughter can be stirred by nervousness, humor, and joy. Laughter can also be a sign of scorn and ridicule. We have all had a conversation with a child or friend about the difference between laughing "with" someone and laughing "at" them. A good sign of whether you are doing the latter is if the person in question is actually laughing. If not, your laughter is not laughter. It's mocking. The Biblical term for it is "scoffing."

Over the next two weeks, we are going to look at two related scenes in the life of Abraham and Sarah where they both laugh. They both laugh about the same thing but in different ways. We are going to look at what this reveals about the state of their souls and what God does about it. Hopefully, we will see how we sometimes act similarly and learn what we can do about it. Today we start with Abraham.

An Orienting Reality (v1-9)

The story of Abraham's laughter occurs within the larger context of God meeting with Abraham again. Verse 1 says, "Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram." If you look back at a verse and do some math, you realize that 13 years have elapsed since the last part of Abraham's story. Maybe this was so that Ishmael could grow up. For whatever reason, God now appears to him again.

God has come to confirm his covenant with Abraham. But God doesn't begin with what He is going to do or even what He wants Abraham to do. He begins with a description of himself. The next part of verse 1 says, "the LORD ... said to him, 'I am God Almighty.'"

This passage contains two names of God. First, Yahweh is often translated as LORD in the Old Testament. This is the covenant name of God. The term "god" can refer to any deity. But Yahweh is the name of the God of the Bible. This is sometimes referred to as His "personal" or "covenant" name because it is the unique name He gives Himself to distinguish Himself as the God who makes a covenant with Abraham and with Israel. The meaning of this name is explained in Exodus 3:13-14 in the exchange between God and Moses at the Burning Bush "13 Then Moses said to God, 'Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?' 14 And God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM'; and He said, 'This is what you shall say to the sons of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

The Second name of God revealed in this passage is El Shaddai which means "God Almighty." It gives a further description and a deeper understanding of who exactly Yahweh is. El is simply the generic Hebrew word "god." Shaddai is a Hebrew word that means "all-powerful, omnipotent, and self-sufficient."

This reminds us that God doesn't owe His existence to anyone or anything else. He doesn't come into existence. He just is. He is the ground of all other existence. He is the reality around which everything else needs to be oriented to find its proper place.

Many times, we begin with ourselves or even with God's commands. But God tells us that the correct starting point in life is the character and identity of God. Start with who

He has revealed Himself to be. That is the center. That is the source. Everything else flows from there.

An Odd Requirement (v10-14)

The rest of the verses read like a summary of the covenant promises made by God to Abraham up to this point. It is not until verse 10 that we get God adding something completely new. He includes an odd requirement as a condition of the covenant. Verse 10 says, “This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.” The rest of this section describes what circumcision is and who should be circumcised.

The larger question many people ask is why? Why does God ask them to do this? It seems like an odd thing for God to ask His people to do. There are a couple of things that could be said in response.

First, it is an external act. Often we use the term spiritual to mean something we can't see or something that happens on the side of us. But the Bible's definition of spiritual includes the physical. In Romans 12:1, Paul writes, “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your [b]spiritual service of worship.” The most spiritual service we can render is to submit our bodies to the Lord for His use.

Some might respond, “Fine, we should submit our bodies. But why this part of the body?” That leads to the second point. This is because our sexual desires are frequently the area of our lives that we least want to subject to the will of God. Circumcision becomes a symbol of submitting our whole bodies to God because sex and gender represent something central to our identity, as evidenced by Genesis 1:26. Though circumcision is no longer a sign of the covenant, it is still essential for us to realize its significance and ask ourselves if our sexuality is something that we have indeed submitted to God.

An Obstacle Removed (v15-22)

“How will Abraham have a son if Sarah can have a son?” It has been the question everyone has been asking since God called Abraham in Genesis 12. They have spent 25 years asking the question, wrestling with God, and trying to fulfill them in their own way. God now makes it explicit.

Verses 15-16 say, “15 Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 “I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of

peoples will come from her.”

This is where Abraham laughs. Verse 17 says, “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed,” This doesn’t mean he was “rolling on the floor laughing.” To fall on your face is a symbol of worship. Abraham had already done this in verse 3 when God first appeared to him.

He then expresses his bewilderment. The rest of verse 17 says, “Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” Abraham’s laughter is not mocking or derisive. This is joy bubbling up out of his heart.

He then asks about his current son. Verse 18 says, “And Abraham said to God, ‘Oh that Ishmael might live before You!’” Abraham isn’t asking God to use Ishmael instead of Sarah’s promised son. Abraham wants a son with Sarah. But he also has spent the last 13 years loving Ishmael. He is asking that God not forget about Ishmael even as He fulfills the promise to Sarah.

God responds first in verse 19, “No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.” The words “no, but” isn’t in the Hebrew text. It literally says, “Indeed, Sarah your wife...” Or, as we might say today, “Seriously, no joke, Sarah, your wife, is going to have a baby.”

God then responds in verses 20-21, “ 20 As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. 21 But My covenant I will establish with Isaac...” God will indeed be generous to Ishmael. He will be blessed like Isaac is blessed. The only difference will be the covenant through which God’s salvation will come will be through Isaac.

What Abraham’s Laugh Reveals About His Heart

The rest of the chapter shows Abraham’s obedient response to what God told him. It’s the laughter I want to go back to. If you look closely at those few verses around that, they reveal the nature of Abraham’s laughter and give us a window into the health of his heart.

Abraham’s Worshipful Heart – He is so moved by the good news God has given him; he falls on his face in worship. How we respond when life goes well is important. Abraham doesn’t pat himself on the back. He worships God and gives him the credit. Like Paul does in Ephesians 3:20-21, “20 Now to Him who is able to do far more

abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, 21 to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations [n]forever and ever. Amen.

Abraham's Joyful Heart – Abraham can't contain his joy. It's a sign that he has joy already in his heart, rooted in God's promise, now erupting to the surface at the coming fulfillment. He is excited. What he hoped for is about to happen, and he can't contain it. How do you and I respond when we get what we desire? Do we still find a reason to complain? Do we criticize some detail? Do we lament how long it took? All those things are as clear an indication of what is in our souls and Abraham's laughter.

Abraham's Humble Heart – Abraham exclaims, "How is this possible?" He isn't doubting (though he has done a fair share of that in other places). He humbly expresses that God's "how" is beyond him. Abraham realizes God is El-Shaddai. He has no idea how God will do what He is about to do. But He can't wait to see it. We need to have this kind of humility. Sometimes we despair because we don't see how God can do something. And if we can't figure it out, it must not be able to be done.

Abraham's Generous Heart – Sometimes, when we finally get what we desire, we become really selfish and self-focused. We forget about everything and everyone else. Abraham doesn't do that. In the midst of his joy, he has a generous heart focusing on others who might not see this as good news. Abraham wants this son through Sarah. But he also wants good things for the son he already has. He loves Ishmael and wants God to bless him too.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the different reasons and ways people laugh? How can laughter be used as an indicator of what's in the heart?
2. What are the two names of God revealed in the passage? What do they mean?
3. What does God give Abraham as the reality around which he should orient and build his life? How can we learn to do the same?
4. How does circumcision fit with the idea of submitting our whole body to God? How can we avoid turning following God into an internal private experience? What part of you do you have a hard time submitting to God?
5. How does Abraham's laughter reveal a worshipful heart? a joyful heart? a humble heart? a generous heart?

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— ABOUT THE AUTHOR —

Dr. Steve Jones has been the Teaching & Training Pastor at Kingsland Baptist Church since June 2016. He teaches regularly through the church in a variety of formats and works with the Discipleship Pastor to equip and develop leaders at Kingsland who are empowered to use their gifting to teach the Bible in life-changing ways.

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