



Believe

STORIES OF FAITH
FROM FATHER ABRAHAM

PART 3

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 9 | SARA LAUGHS AT GOD

GENESIS 18:1-15

Last week we began our discussion of what our laughter reveals about our hearts. We started with early 20th-century American pastor, preacher, and writer A.W. Tozer's 7 Rules for Self-Discovery, which he claims, are good indicators of the health of our soul and the direction of our lives.

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

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

We zeroed in on number 7. 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.

How we laugh is equally important to what we laugh at and perhaps related to it. People laugh for different reasons. Laughter can be stirred by nervousness, humor, and joy. Laughter can also be a sign of scorn and derision. We have all talked 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."

Last week, we looked at how Abraham laughed when God told him he was going to have a son. But that laughter wasn't scorn; it was worship and revealed a heart of joy, excitement, bewilderment, and humility. Today we are going to look at a related scene in the life of Sarah. She laughs at the same thing but in a different way. The goal of the lesson is to diagnose the state of Sarah's soul that would cause her to respond to God

in this way and also see what God does for her in this state. All of us, at some point or another, will find ourselves in Sarah's situation. Understanding what it means and how to get out of it are essential.

MEETING WITH GOD (v1-7)

The story starts with Abraham taking a bit of a siesta. Verse 1 says, "Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day." It was hot. Abraham was trying to escape the heat by sitting in the shade, perhaps in a place where he might catch a breeze.

Whether or not Abraham knew immediately it was God appearing to him, this passage shows Abraham as someone eager to show hospitality. Verses 2 through 8 show all he did beyond what would have been expected. In this, he sets an example for us. Hebrews 13:2 encourages us: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it." How many of us miss divine appointments because we are unwilling to show hospitality at inconvenient times?

As a side note, notice how Abraham changes gears. One moment he is sitting in the doorway of his tent, trying to escape the heat of the day. The next moment, he is a flurry of activity as he prepares. Sometimes we have more in the tank than we realize. We just find various excuses not to use it.

MESSAGE FROM GOD (v8-11)

Abraham stands next to these divine visitors as they eat in the shade of the tree. As they eat, they inquire about his wife, whose name they already know. Verse 9 says, "Then they said to him, 'Where is Sarah your wife?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.'" The question is startling if for no other reason than that the messengers knew his wife's name. What may have been an inclination or a suspicion about their divine identity becomes clearer. These are no normal quests.

It was the custom of the day for women of a household to keep their distance from men who were not known to the household. She isn't eavesdropping. She is listening like any woman in the ancient world would have while preparing food in the kitchen area of the tent. This question by the guests is less of a question and more of a comment that what is about to be said concerns her too.

Verse 10a contains the body of the message, "He said, 'I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah, your wife will have a son.'" It's a startling claim, not just that she will have a baby, but that it will happen very soon. So soon that in twelve months, she will already have given birth not just to a baby but to a son.

As if to set the stage for the real encounter in this passage, verses 10a-11 remind us both where Sarah was and what her status is, “10 And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him. 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing.” She is listening, and she isn’t just childless; she is beyond the age when she would be able to have children.

MOCKERY OF GOD (v12-15)

Sarah’s response to the news is outwardly similar to her husband’s when he received the same news. Verse 12 says, “Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?’”

They both laughed at the same news but for different reasons. Abraham’s laughter was astonishment, surprise, and joy. Sarah’s was something else. It is as if she is dismissing or deriding God. Her laughter, and subsequent comment, are basically telling God, “Yeah right, sure, whatever.” Her response reveals that either Abraham hadn’t told her about God’s promise. Or, more likely, that he hadn’t convinced her to believe it was true.

God calls her out and says to her in verse 14 for the first time a promise repeated numerous times through the Bible, “Is anything too difficult for the LORD?”

Embarrassed about being called out, Sarah denies that she laughed. Verse 15 says, “Sarah denied it, however, saying, ‘I did not laugh’; for she was afraid.” Perhaps it’s “technically” true. Perhaps she didn’t laugh out loud, but God knew the status of her heart. She had scoffed at God and His promise, perhaps in her own heart, but she had scoffed nonetheless. God recognizes it and calls her to acknowledge it. The verse ends, “And He said, ‘No, but you did laugh.’”

WHAT SARAH’S LAUGHTER REVEALS

When you look a little more closely at the episode, a few details reveal the status of Sarah’s heart that manifested itself in laughing not with God but at God.

Sarah’s angry heart – First, Sarah is mad. Verse 12 tells us her first thought as she laughed, “After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?” The reference to pleasure is more than a crass reference to Abraham and Sarah’s sexual relationship. It is a reference to the “pleasure” of motherhood. She is bitter. Life has passed her by and denied her what she believed to be a chief pleasure in life.

Sarah's arrogant heart – The laughter also reveals a sense of hopelessness deep in Sarah's heart. She is sad and despairing. In verse 13, God reveals Sarah's thoughts to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?'" This is not the only time in Scripture that people laugh at God because they think they know better than God what is possible. In Luke 8:53, the family of Jairus responds similarly to Jesus: "And they began laughing at Him, knowing that she had died." This type of despair is ultimately a form of arrogance. It is a declaration to God and the world that you know for certain that no good can come of some situation. Hope requires humility. It requires recognizing that God is bigger than you and that you could be wrong. Sarah doesn't have that.

Sarah's ashamed heart – In addition to arrogance and anger, Sarah is also ashamed of the status of her soul. When God calls her out, she denies it. Verse 15, "Sarah denied it however, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid." She realized that God knew the parts of her that she tried to keep hidden from others. He revealed her heart. What bubbled to the surface made her retreat.

WHAT GOD DOES FOR SARAH'S HEART

Often, we, like Sarah, nurse hidden hurts in our hearts. We are ashamed of them, so we keep them hidden. God brings these emotions to the surface not to shame us but so His perfect love can cast it out. That is what we see God doing for Sarah. He doesn't call her out to mock or shame her further. He does it so that his perfect love can heal and restore her.

God knows Her heart v13 –God knows what Sarah was thinking. He knows what she is struggling with. The same is true of us. Psalm 139 begins with, "O LORD, You have searched me and known me." It might sound scary or intrusive, but it is important to realize that God already knows our hearts. He doesn't use this information against us. He is a spiritual doctor diagnosing our spiritual health, finding pockets of disease, and showing us the way to healing. It's comforting to know that we don't have to inform God of our hurts. He already knows and cares. Psalm 56:8 says, "You put my tears in Your bottle. Are they not in Your book?"

God Challenges Her Assumptions v14a – One of the themes of the Bible is God breaking out of the boxes we put him in. Sarah assumes she knows how the rest of her life will play out. She is wrong. God loves to challenge our assumptions. That is why the phrase God says here is repeated numerous times throughout the Bible, "Is anything too difficult for the LORD?"

God Demonstrates His Goodness v14b – My favorite part of this passage is how God responds to Sarah’s hard and hurt heart. Many parents, if a child responded to us this way, would say something like, “Fine, then forget about then,” or “Be that way; let me know if you ever change your mind.” We frequently leave people in the state we find them in. But not God. He calls us out. But He is also eager to demonstrate His goodness to us. In verse 14b, God says, “At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.” God basically says, “Watch this; I’ll prove it to you.” God doesn’t withhold his goodness because of our hard-heartedness. He loves demonstrating his goodness to us and inspiring us to believe Him more.

God Calls her to Confess v15 – The last thing God does, though, might escape notice. He makes her acknowledge her laughter. Verse 15 says, “Sarah denied it however, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. And He said, “No, but you did laugh.” God calls her to admit it. Not so that He can win the argument or make her look back in front of her husband. He does it so that He can free her from that fear. God knows our sin. When we confess it to him, we aren’t telling him something He doesn’t already know. We acknowledge before Him that what He says about our sin is true. We agree with Him; the Greek word translated as “to confess” really means “to agree.” Confession means submitting who we are completely to God. It means calling everything in our souls out of the darkness of sin and into his marvelous light.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is different between how Sarah laughs and how Abraham laughs?
2. How does Sarah’s laughter reveal an angry heart? Have you ever felt similarly?
3. How does Sarah’s laughter reveal an arrogant heart? Have you ever felt similarly?
4. Why is despair a form of arrogance? What does it mean that hope requires humility?
5. What does God do to help heal Sarah’s heart?

LESSON 10 | ABRAHAM INTERCEDES FOR SODOM

GENESIS 18:16-33

A paradox is a statement or idea that seems illogical, unacceptable or contradicts our expectations. Philosophers are famous for confusing people by posing these and other similar questions. One such philosopher was Zeno of Elea, who lived in Ancient Greece in the 5th century during the time of Socrates. Zeno came up with so many paradoxes one wonders if he actually believed them or if he just liked trying to confuse people.

Probably the most famous of Zeno's paradox is the one where he "proves" the motion is an illusion. This one is so famous that it is what people are referring to when they mention "Zeno's Paradox." Here is how it goes. Zeno argues that motion isn't real; it's just an illusion. He claims to prove it in the following way.

In the same way that numbers are infinite because you can always just add one to the biggest number you can think of to make it bigger; well, numbers can also be divided. No matter how small a number is, you can always divide it in half. This creates a problem when you apply this to distances. To travel a distance, you have to travel to a point half as far. To get there, you must pass another point half that far. So, to travel a mile, you first must go half a mile and, before that, a quarter of a mile. Since you can always divide in half whatever distance you are trying to travel, that means there are an infinite number of points between where you are and where you want to go. Since crossing an infinite number of points is impossible, motion itself is, therefore, impossible.

There have been several rebuttals and refutations of this paradox by many great philosophers starting with Plato and Aristotle. But for most people, the answer isn't a long philosophical argument. The answer is to just do it. Take a step, and you will realize that motion is possible.

This works with a great many things in the world. Many things in this world are difficult to understand but easy to do. Prayer is one of those things for me. It seems like a paradox. Why do I need to pray? Do I need to convince God to act on my behalf? Does God need my advice or input? Do we change God's mind with our prayers? When you think about prayer long enough, it will make your head spin.

What is funny is that Jesus addresses some of these concerns in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6:7-8, He says, “7 “And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. 8 So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.” Read the last part of verse 8 again: God knows what we need before we ask Him. If I am writing the next verse, it would say, “Don’t worry about praying then. God knows better than you do, so let Him take care of it.” Frankly, it is the reason why I struggle with prayer. What am I going to tell God that He doesn’t already know. But Jesus says in Verse 9, “pray, then, in this way...” Jesus doesn’t answer the paradox. He tells us to just do it.

Today we are going to look at what many people consider to be the first prayer in the Bible. Abraham asks God to spare the people of Sodom. Though it reads a little like Abraham is bargaining with God, the truth is that this is an example of intercessory prayer. As we look at this first extended prayer in the Bible, perhaps we will learn how to pray like our Father Abraham.

GOD INCLUDES ABRAHAM AS A SON (v16-19)

The story starts at the end of the meal, where Sarah laughed at God. After the meal, verse 16 says, “Then the men rose up from there, and looked down toward Sodom; and Abraham was walking with them to send them off.”

As Abraham walks with them, escorting them out, God tells Abraham that He has decided to reveal His reason for this journey. In verses 17-18, God says, “17 The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, 18 since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed?”

God’s decision to include Abraham in his plan is revealed in Verse 19, which says, “For I have chosen him.” God has chosen Abraham. That doesn’t mean Abraham has no choice. It means that Abraham needs more information to fulfill all God has for him to do. The rest of verse 19 says, “So that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him.” Abraham has been chosen, but Abraham has a part to play for God to accomplish what He has promised to do through Abraham.

This reminds us that when God calls us into relationship with Him, he is inviting us into his family. All this is best summoned up in Galatians 4:4-8, “4 But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, 5 so that

He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. 6 Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” 7 Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.”

GOD INVESTIGATES SIN IN SODOM (v20-21)

The plan that God reveals to Abraham involves God coming down to see if the sin of Sodom is as bad as He has heard. Verses 20-21 say, “20 And the LORD said, ‘The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. 21 I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know.’”

Many modern readers are uncomfortable with how God is presented in this passage. Is God far away? Is God only bothered when the cry becomes too great? Is he like a parent in the next room who only gets involved when the kids are making too much noise?

It is important not to push the characterizations in this passage too far. Remember, this is early on in the Bible. God is speaking and presenting Himself to Abraham in a way that Abraham can comprehend. This passage presents God as caring about sin and righteousness. He is coming to investigate the sin of Sodom because He has heard the cry for justice from the people that their sin is injuring. It also presents God as fair. He isn't taking the side of the one who cries the loudest. He is investigating the situation to determine the true state of affairs. Finally, it shows that God is involved. It is his creation. He will take steps to right the wrong.

GOD INVITES ABRAHAM TO INTERCEDE (v23-33)

After God reveals his plan, God gives room for Abraham to respond. Verse 22 says, “Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the LORD.” It is a subtle but important detail. Two of the three men depart and head for Sodom. But the Lord, God himself, remains behind, almost like He knows Abraham has something to say and wants to give him room to say it. What follows is a sustained dialogue that Abraham has with God. In it, we have a great example of what real prayer should look like.

Abraham prays with Boldness (v23)

Verse 23 says, “Abraham came near and said, “Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” Abraham understands that there is wickedness in Sodom. He also understands that Sodom's sin justifies God's intervention and judgment. He starts his plea by focusing on those who are not wicked. By righteous, Abraham

doesn't mean perfect. He means those whose lives are oriented toward God. Remember Genesis 15:6, Abraham "believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." Abraham's life before and after is far from perfect. But it shows the trajectory of his heart to believe God and his desire to learn to believe God more.

It's a bold move. But all prayer is. We are encouraged to pour out our hearts before God, not to hold anything back. We can do so because neither a blind fate nor an impersonal force controls the universe. A loving, personal God is running things, and he invites us to be involved and wants us to let Him know what we are thinking.

Abraham prays with Love (v24)

You'll notice that Abraham isn't just praying for the righteous. He is praying for the wicked as well. If he were only praying for the righteous, he would ask God to deliver them from the city before He destroys it, which is the plan that God ultimately employs. But that is not what Abraham asks for. Notice what verse 24 says, "Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it?" Abraham asks God to spare the entire city if fifty righteous people are found. He doesn't ask for the righteous. He doesn't even ask for his family. He pleads for the wicked to be spared.

The Hebrew word translated as "to spare" is elsewhere commonly translated as "to forgive" and literally means "to carry." This gives a powerful picture of what forgiveness really is. It means not making people carry their own sin or its consequences. Abraham is asking God to do for Sodom what God is eventually going to do for the whole world in Jesus. Abraham isn't compromising his beliefs or encouraging God to calm down. He is praying with the same love that God has for people. A love that doesn't overlook sin and guilt but desires them to be delivered from it.

Abraham prays with Confidence (v25)

Twice in verse 25, Abraham repeats the phrase, "Far be it from You!" He is not accusing God; he is acknowledging what he knows about the character of God. He is resting in who he knows God to be. He knows that God is just. He concludes verse 25 with, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" Someone once said that one of the things we do in prayer is "urge God to be God." We remind ourselves and God of who He is. We reiterate the promises He has made. This is one of the best reasons to begin prayer with worship. Sometimes we get on our knees and start giving God our list of things we want Him to do for us. There is nothing wrong with having needs or submitting our needs to God. We are encouraged to do so. But the best place to start is with who God is. So,

start your prayer by saying true things about who God is. It will give you reasons to be grateful to God. It will move you to worship God for who He is. It will guide and focus your prayer. And ultimately, it will give you confidence in God.

Abraham prays with Humility (v27)

Abraham intercedes boldly with God on behalf of Sodom. But he doesn't do so arrogantly. His attitude towards God is one of humility. In verse 27, Abraham says, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes." Humility is a recognition that we have limitations that God does not. Here Abraham lists a few of his limitations. He is mortal. He came from dust. He will one day be ashes. Whatever glory and honor he has, he has because God gave it to him. We would do well to remember this. When we pray, we should always remember to acknowledge our limitations. We don't have God's strength. We don't have God's knowledge or wisdom. We don't have God's love. Sometimes we get mad at God for not doing something we wanted Him to do. Before we become angry, we would do well to acknowledge that God knows more than we do and sees farther than we do.

Abraham Prays with Surrender (v33)

After the exchange, verse 33 says, "As soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the LORD departed, and Abraham returned to his place." Abraham gives God the last word. He does not keep insisting and insisting. He doesn't make God give him His word and sign a contract. He doesn't close the meeting with action items that everyone has agreed to do and deadlines by which they will be finished. God has included Abraham in his deliberation. God has heard Abraham's question. God has reassured Abraham that He is both just and merciful. Now Abraham responds in trust that whatever God will do is the most loving, merciful, and just thing that could happen. It's an act of trust. It's an act of surrender. Perhaps this is the real work of prayer: to pour your heart out before God, then leave your burden with Him. Psalm 55:22 says, "Cast your burden upon the LORD and He will sustain you." That is what Abraham does. Then He allows God to depart and go be God, while Abraham returns and focuses on just being Abraham.

CONCLUSION

So, did Abraham change God's mind? I have no idea. Prayer is a paradox. God knows what we are going to tell him. He knows our needs. He knows what He is going to do already. Yet he invites us to be a part of the conversation. Perhaps, we should do less worrying about how prayer works and do more praying. Abraham isn't bothering God. Because of his new identity, he has been invited to be a part of the conversation. We, who are his children, are in the same situation. We should follow his lead and learn to pray with boldness, love, confidence, humility, and surrender. As we do so, may our faith be deepened as we draw closer to God, see the world from His perspective, and see Him answer our prayers.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Is praying hard for you? What makes prayer difficult sometimes? Do you sometimes overthink what is happening?
2. How does Abraham's identity affect God's decision to include him in His plans? What does this mean for us as well?
3. What are some ways that people might misinterpret how God is described as coming down to investigate the sin of Sodom? What is the real point of God being presented in this way?
4. What does God do to invite Abraham to pray? How are we invited to pray?
5. What does Abraham's prayer teach us about how to pray? What does it mean to pray with boldness? Love? Confidence? Humility? Surrender? Which is hardest for you? Why?

LESSON 11 | LIVING LIKE LOT

GENESIS 19:1-38

When you say the name “Harry Truman,” most people think you are talking about the 33rd president of the United States. That was Harry S. Truman. There was another Harry Truman, though, Harry R. Truman, who achieved fame differently. Harry R. Truman was the owner and operator of a mountain lodge on Spirit Lake on the slopes of Mt. St. Helens in Washington State. In the spring of 1980, Mt. St. Helens shows signs of a potential eruption. When the forest service closed and evacuated the area around the mountain, Harry R. Truman refused to leave.

Some people thought he had a death wish. He was an older man, and his wife had recently passed away. But the truth is that he was a stubborn man who thought he was right, and everyone else was wrong about the danger posed by the eruption. He famously said, “If the mountain goes, I’m going with it. This area is heavily timbered, Spirit Lake is in between me and the mountain, and the mountain is a mile away; the mountain ain’t gonna hurt me.” When Mt. St. Helens did erupt on the morning of May 18th, 1980, it didn’t erupt from its top. Instead, the whole side of the mountain slid off, and the volcano erupted to the side, directly at Harry Truman and Spirit Lake.

We are rightly concerned when we see people take needless risks and gamble with their lives. But the truth is we do it all the time. We all play a dangerous game with sin. The story of the Bible is how we constantly return to it, desire it, and refuse to leave it. Sin is like Mt. St. Helens; we are all Harry R. Truman. We have grown used to it. We think we know what it is capable of. We think we are safe. We are comfortable, So we refuse to leave it.

Today we are going to look closely at the story of God’s destroying Sodom and Gomorrah. The story’s focus will be on Abraham’s nephew, Lot. God tells Lot that the city he lives in is about to be destroyed because of its sin. Lot doesn’t deny the sins of Sodom. But shockingly, he refuses to leave. He has grown comfortable in Sodom and is unwilling to leave. My hope is that as we study this passage, we will see how we are living like Lot playing a dangerous game with sin. Perhaps what happens to Lot will motivate us to flee as far as we can from sin.

LOTS' DEAL WITH THE DEVIL (V1-3)

The story starts like the previous one. Lot, like Abraham, encounters some visitors. However, instead of Abraham sitting in the entryway of His tent, verse 1 tells us, "Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom." As Lot sees new faces entering the city, he invites them to stay at his house. In verse 2, He says, "Now behold, my lords, please turn aside into your servant's house, and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise early and go on your way."

Things have changed for Lot since the last time we saw him. Back in chapter 13, Lot and Abraham resolve a conflict between their herders by going different ways. Abraham gave Lot the choice of any area in the promised land. Lot chose to leave the land of promise and live in the Jordan Valley instead. Genesis 13:12-13 says, "12 Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in the cities of the [j]valley, and moved his tents as far as Sodom. 13 Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the LORD."

Lot has moved his family out of the promised land and towards an exceedingly wicked city. Initially, he just pitched his tents near Sodom. But when this story opens, he has moved into the city and is sitting at the city gates, a place of leadership and honor. Lot has become comfortable in Sodom, even though he knows it is a wicked place. Proof that he knows of Sodom's wickedness is found in verse 3. When the men refuse Lot's invitation and instead offer to spend the night in the town square, verse 3 says, "he urged them strongly, so they turned aside to him and entered his house." He knows that Sodom isn't a place for a stranger to be after dark.

Lot had made a "deal with the devil." He has compromised with sin and become comfortable in Sodom. The initial result is that Lot became a person of influence and wealth. He was successful. But the story is about to take a dark turn.

LOT'S DARK DECISION (V4-9)

The men of Sodom hear of the visitors and surround Lot's house. They demand that Lot surrender them so that they might "know" them. Yes, verse 5 means what you think it means. They intend to sexually assault the two men. Lot goes out by himself in an attempt to calm the crowd down. In verse 7, He calls the men of Sodom "brothers" and encourages them to act rightly. He then proceeds to make a shocking substitution. In verse 8, Lot offers to surrender his unmarried daughters to the lust of the crowd for them to do whatever they want.

Lot justified his hideous offer by saying in verse 8, “only do nothing to these men, inasmuch as they have come under the shelter of my roof.” To protect his guests, he is willing to wrong his children.

Lot’s evil compromise doesn’t satisfy the crowd. They respond in verse 9, “This one came in as an alien, and already he is acting like a judge; now we will treat you worse than them.” This passage shows us that you can’t make peace with sin. Lot was comfortable and successful, no doubt thinking he had found a middle ground. But these words reveal that the men of Sodom still consider him a foreigner and resent his attempts to modify their behavior. They then decide to treat him the worst of all.

LOT’S DEBATING DEPARTURE (V10-18)

The angels rescue Lot from the angry crowd and reveal to him what is about to happen. In verses 12-13, the angels say, “12Whom else have you here? A son-in-law, and your sons, and your daughters, and whomever you have in the city, bring them out of the place; 13 for we are about to destroy this place, because their outcry has become so great before the LORD that the LORD has sent us to destroy it.” It is a fantastic offer. The angels tell Lot of the coming doom that is about to fall on this place so that he can escape. They also tell him that he can bring with him anybody He wants.

The problem is not just that nobody believes him. He tells his sons-in-law, and they think he is joking. The real problem is that Lot himself doesn’t want to leave. Verse 16 starts with three sad and sickening words, “but he hesitated.” Lot looked around at all he had amassed, all he had worked for, and couldn’t let it go.

It takes the angels physically grabbing Lot, his wife, and his children by the hands and dragging them out to get them to leave Sodom. Once out of the city, he is told to run into the hills for safety. Again, Lot refuses to obey. Instead, he delays again and argues with the angels.

In verse 18, Lot says, “Oh no, my lords!” Rather than obeying without question the people sent by God to rescue him, Lot suggests that he would prefer to flee not to the mountains. In verse 20, he adds, “Now behold, this town is near enough to flee to, and it is small. Please, let me escape there (is it not small?) that my life may be saved.”

It’s so bizarre. He isn’t grateful that he is being saved. He doesn’t trust that the same God delivering him will protect him in the mountains. Lot doesn’t want to go back to the tents. He doesn’t want to start all over. It’s like he wants a nearby new town to serve as a new Sodom. Maybe there, he hopes, he can have everything he is leaving behind in Sodom. What ends up happening, sadly, is that in this town, he will end up perpetrating the sin against his daughters that he once invited the men of Sodom to commit.

In Verse 21, the angel says, “Behold, I grant you this request also, not to overthrow the

town of which you have spoken.” But the truth is that this is a sad compromise with a hard-hearted man to get him to turn his back on a terrible place that he refuses to leave.

LOT’S DELAYING DELIVERANCE (V24-29)

Once Lot is at Zoar, verse 24 says, “Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven.” People have speculated whether a natural phenomenon lies behind this miraculous act of destruction. The Dead Sea area is still known for sulfur fumes and salt pillars. As with other miracles in the Old Testament, the “when” is often the miracle and not the “how.” God may have used the elements common in the area to pass his judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. The timing of the event is something that only God can do.

Lot’s family, however, will delay one last time, and there will be consequences this time. Verse 26 says, “But his wife, from behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.” The looking isn’t the issue. Abraham, in verses 27-28, also looks down and observes the destruction of Sodom. It is what the looking represents. She is looking back on all she is leaving behind and can’t bear to let it go. She is sad to see Sodom, with all its sin, be destroyed. She wished she could have it back. So she delays even more than Lot. She turns, maybe even turns back a bit, and gets caught in the destruction. Some have seen her punishment as a mythological explanation for the pillars of salt in the area. I don’t think that we are supposed to understand a complete transformation into salt but rather that she was killed by the fire and sulfur then became, like so many things near the dead sea, encrusted with salt.

LOT’S DISGRACEFUL DEBAUCHERY 29-38

One would hope that Lot’s story would conclude with him returning to Abraham or at least to the life he planned on living when he and Abraham separated. But the story of Lot ends with a terrible conclusion. Verse 30 says, “Lot went up from Zoar, and stayed in the mountains, and his two daughters with him; for he was afraid to stay in Zoar; and he stayed in a cave, he and his two daughters.” Lot refuses to trust God or believe His promises. The angel says they will be safe in Zoar, but Lot doesn’t stay there. He heads to the mountains anyway in the hopes of finding safety.

While living in the caves, the daughters hatch a sick plan. Verse 31 reveals their fear that they will not be able to marry and have children. Some think this is because they think the whole world has been destroyed, even though God has explicitly said he was only judging Sodom and Gomorrah. Others think the daughters are worried that no one will want to marry them when they learn they are refugees from a town cursed by God.

Either way, they concoct a terrible plan to conceive children through drunken incest with their father. In a sick, twisted, horrible conclusion to the story, Lot himself inadvertently commits the sin that he proposed the men of Sodom carry out on his own daughters.

CONCLUSION

Though many people focus on the way God judges the sin of Sodom, the truth is that the focus of this passage is really Lot and his inability to leave his sin behind. We are meant to live our lives according to the pattern of Father Abraham, but the truth is that most of us are living like Lot. We are playing a dangerous game with sin thinking we will win. Lot's life is an example and a warning to flee as far as possible from sin.

God judges sin. He pours out His wrath on it. If God hadn't destroyed Sodom, Sodom would have destroyed Lot. Like Lot, we all play a dangerous game to see how much sin we can keep in our lives without getting burned. Lot's story is a powerful example of the dangers of trying to live a life of compromise with sin. It wasn't easy to get Lot out of Sodom. And even after he had left, He still carried a little Sodom in his heart.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How have things changed for Lot since he came to Sodom? Where is he living? What is his status in the town? What has Lot compromised?
2. What are some indicators that Lot knows the people of Sodom are wicked? How has the wickedness of Sodom infiltrated into the Lot's family? What are some ways that we make an uneasy peace with the wickedness around us?
3. Why do you think Lot continually hesitated to leave Sodom? Why do you think Lot's sons-in-law thought he was joking? Why do we sometimes hesitate to leave our sin?
4. Why do you think Lot requested to flee to Zoar? Why did Lot's look back? How do we sometimes do the same thing?
5. How do we sometimes play a similar game to Lot? How do we play a dangerous game of compromise with sin? What does it mean to live like Lot?

LESSON 12 | ABRAHAM AND ABIMELECH: PT. 1 RESOLVING CONFLICT

GENESIS 20

There is nothing good about a car accident. No matter how minor, they are all terrible. The sound of crunching metal. The feeling of frustration when you wonder why you didn't see it coming. The realization that you know what your next weeks or months will be focused on fixing.

I remember a car accident I was in one time. I had just moved to a new city. I had been there a week. I was still learning my way around. Just when I was starting to get comfortable, bam, I get hit. I remember standing by the side of the road, pleading my case with the police officer. I didn't think the accident was my fault and was trying to ensure everybody at the scene knew it.

I repeatedly pestered the officer to make sure it was the other driver who was listed as the one responsible for the accident. Finally, the officer looked at my license, realized I wasn't from the state, and told me that there was no such thing as one party being totally at fault in this state. There was always some blame to go around. There was always something that you could have done to avoid the accident. So, he wasn't determining who was to blame. He was trying to decide how much each of us was to blame.

My sense of justice immediately went into overdrive. It didn't seem fair. I could think of a hundred scenarios where one person would be entirely to blame for an accident. I then had to ask myself whether this was one of those scenarios. The truth is, I still felt like it was mostly the other guy's fault, but the truth was that there were things I could have done differently to avoid the accident. I just didn't want to admit it because I knew what it would mean for my insurance rates.

Interpersonal conflict is a lot like car accidents. Somebody hurts us, and we end up hurting them in return. We justify our response by saying they are more to blame. We are motivated by fear and anger. We justify our sin. We live in perpetual conflict with others. But we feel like it is not our fault and, therefore, not our responsibility to fix.

Today we are going to look at a conflict that emerges in the life of Abraham. He forgets to trust God. He falls back into old sinful habits. He ends up in conflict with a local

king named Abimelech. By looking at how they end up in conflict, how they initially try to handle it, and how they eventually get out of it, perhaps we can see ourselves in Abraham and Abimelech's shoes, follow in their footsteps, and find the peace and restoration that comes from shifting from fixing blame to finding peace.

ABRAHAM AND ABIMELECH FOLLOW FEAR (V1-2)

After the events of Sodom, Abraham decided to move a bit further west. Verse 1 says, "Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar." He moves away from the Dead Sea and towards Egypt. We aren't told about Abraham's motivation, but the phrase "from there" clearly connects the reason for Abraham moving with the destruction of Sodom recounted in the previous story.

Worry and fear do play a part, though, because as he gets closer to Egypt, he returns to an old ploy that he used there. He starts playing the old game of pretending he isn't married to Sarah. It didn't work last time; I don't know why he thinks it'll work this time. And it doesn't. Verse 2 says, "Abraham said of Sarah, his wife, "She is my sister." So, Abimelech, king of Gerar, sent and took Sarah."

Abimelech's motivations are a little more challenging to figure out because not much is said except that he took Sarah. Some think that we are supposed to assume the same scenario as before in Egypt, that Abimelech thinks he is doing Abraham a favor by marrying his sister and allying him with the king. But Abimelech doesn't give Abraham anything in return, as would have been the custom of the day for marriage, so it seems less like he was forging an alliance.

The more likely scenario is that Abimelech is acting in fear. Abraham has enough men to serve as an army, as shown by his rescue of Lot in the Battle of the Five Kings in Genesis 14. He has enough influence with God to ensure the same wayward nephew's escape from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Now this guy has entered your area. When it says Abimelech "took Sarah," the most likely reason is that she is serving as a kind of hostage. This also was a common activity in the ancient world. If you were worried about conflict breaking out with another group, the two groups would swap people. If you didn't act right, there would be trouble. If they weren't treated right, there would also be trouble. Sometimes these were reciprocal agreements. Sometimes they were one-sided. This seems like what is going on here. Abimelech takes Sarah under the guise of marriage. But the truth is he is acting in fear. He wants Abraham to be on his best behavior while in Abimelech's territory.

ABRAHAM AND ABIMELECH FIND FAULT (V3-13)

It is God who gets the story back on track. HE appears to Abimelech in a dream and gets right to the point. In verse 3, God says, “Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married.”

Abimelech responds to God that it’s not his fault. In verses 4-5, He says, “4 Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, “Lord, will You slay a nation, Even though blameless? 5 Did he, not himself say to me, ‘She is my sister’? And she herself said, ‘He is my brother.’ In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this.”

Many people take Abimelech’s words as God’s response and proof of his innocence. He acted in ignorance, and therefore it’s not his fault. But when God responds to Abimelech’s defense, He says in verse 6, “Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart, you have done this.” God only acknowledges that Abimelech had “integrity of heart.” He doesn’t repeat Abimelech’s phrase “innocence of hand.” “Integrity of heart” doesn’t mean “completely upright and innocent.” It just means that Abimelech can honestly say he wasn’t trying to marry a married woman.

The main thing about Abimelech’s exchange with God is that he tries to shift the blame and responsibility from himself to Abraham. Verse 5 is critical, “Did he not himself say to me...” Abimelech tells God, “This isn’t my fault. It’s Abraham’s fault.”

When confronted by Abimelech, Abraham does the same thing. He finds other people to blame. In verse 11, He blames Abimelech, “Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place.” In verse 12, he claims he “technically” told the truth, “Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife.” In verse 13, Abraham actually blames God: “When God caused me to wander from my father’s house.”

ABRAHAM AND ABIMELECH FOCUS ON FORGIVENESS 14-18

I wonder how much time elapsed between verses 13 and 14. The confrontation that has occurred has taken place publicly. Verse 8 tells us that this whole scene unfolded in the presence of his royal court. Abimelech tries to vindicate himself by saying publicly, “you wronged me by lying to me.” Abraham responds, “I only lied to you because I was afraid of how you would treat me.” They are perfectly positioned to go back and forth, blaming each other and exonerating themselves.

But instead of that, Abimelech shifts from blaming to restoration. I can almost see him standing there, sighing, shrugging his shoulders, and saying, “Yeah, you know, you’re

right. I see your point. I kind of just took Sarah to make sure you acted right in my land. Here is your wife back and what I should have given to you before.” Verse 14 says, “Abimelech then took sheep and oxen and male and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him.” He also doesn’t want Abraham to leave. In verse 15, He invites Abraham to stay wherever he wants. Finally, he releases Sarah and publicly exonerates her of blame or fault.

Abraham also shifts from blame to restoration. He could have been stubborn and hurt and fearful. Instead, verse 17 says, “Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore children.” He prayed for the blessing and flourishing of a person a few minutes ago he had been living in fear of. And God heard his prayer.

APPLICATION

This story is a helpful example of how to move forward during conflict.

1. Surrender Fear – Both Abimelech and Abraham operated in fear. Often, we get into a cycle of sin and defensiveness because we are listening to and living in fear. Before you can move on in reconciliation with others, you have to be willing to ask yourself what you are afraid of. You have to remind yourself that your fear is lying to you. You have to choose to listen to something other than your fear.

2. Submit to God – This is where belief comes in. Fear is our frequent justification for disobeying God. Belief is choosing to reject fear and do what God commands. The two go hand in hand. You won’t be able to surrender fear until you submit to God. You won’t be able to submit to God until you surrender your fear.

3. Stop Blaming – Trying to figure out who is to blame is a tedious and unhelpful game to get into. In most conflicts, there is enough blame to go around. We all justify our own sinful acts because they were caused by someone else’s more sinful act. Then that person does the same to you. Trying to figure out who is more to blame won’t help anybody. It will just deepen the conflict.

4. Seek Peace – You can’t go back and change how the conflict started. But you can start where you are and change how it ends. Stop blaming and seek peace. Seek to be restored. Most people spend so much time trying to fix the right amount of blame where it belongs that they never let their anger and fear go. So, their lives are a constant cycle of fear, sin, conflict, and blame.

5. Start First – Someone has to go first. Someone has to lay down their arms. Someone has to stop standing with their arms crossed and reach for an embrace. Someone has to be the first to speak a kind word or accept responsibility. Most of us don't go first in seeking peace and restoration because we are stubbornly caught in the fear, sin, conflict, blame cycle. We refuse to lose. We refuse to admit we are wrong. Sadly, nothing will change until someone is willing to go first.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do Abraham and Abimelech act out of fear in this passage? How do we act similarly?
2. How do Abraham and Abimelech both try to determine who is most at fault for their actions? How do we sometimes do the same thing?
3. What can we learn to admit the fears that are causing us to live in sin and learn to believe God and obey him?
4. How can we learn to stop trying to figure out who is more at fault and start trying to live at peace with each other?
5. Do you find it hard to “go first” in apologizing and seeking restoration? Why? What can you do to make this a priority?

NOTES:



— ABOUT THE AUTHOR —

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