

The image features a circular graphic that resembles a torn piece of paper or a ring. The center is a solid black circle, surrounded by a thick, light gray ring with a rough, fibrous texture. The text is overlaid on this graphic.

The Quarterly

Abraham



Cities Church

Art Direction & Design

Ryan Leichty

Illustrators

Ryan Leichty

Callie Leichty

Editors

Michael Thiel

Jonathan Parnell

Tom Keefe

Contributors

Eric Beise

Rachel Beise

Michelle Griep

Haakon Hansen

Jessica Hansen

Zach Krych

Sara Krych

Linda Linder

David Mathis

Mike Polley

Joanna Polley

Joe Rigney

Amelia Schumann

Mike Schumann

Shawn Vradenburg

Ashley Vradenburg

Jeff Waldron

Christina Waldron

The Quarterly is a publication of Cities Church that complements our current sermon series. It includes Bible study resources and articles from our congregation.

Website

www.citieschurch.com

Social Media

@citieschurch

Contents

- 1 Intro to Abraham
Back to the Beginning
Jonathan Parnell

- 4 Approaching the Patriarchs
Joe Rigney

- 11 Week 1
Spoilers
Tom Keefe

- 23 Week 2
Learning to Live on God's Promises
David Mathis

- 33 Week 3
Fight to Free the Captives
Zach Krych

- 42 Story
Jessica Hansen

- 55 Week 4
How Quick Are You?
Michelle Griep

- 64 Story
Eric Beise

- 73 **Week 5**
Is God's Presence and Promise Enough?
Mike Polley
- 85 **Week 6**
Genesis 16
Shawn Vradenburg
- 95 **Week 7**
Genesis 17
Haakon Hansen
- 105 **Week 8**
Abraham—God's Friend
Linda Linder
- 114 **Story**
Joanna Polley
- 135 **Week 9**
The Reformation: Trick or Treat
David Mathis
- 147 **Week 10**
Walking by Faith
Sara Krych
- 157 **Week 11**
Story
Rachel Beise

- 175 **Week 12**
God Will Provide
Amelia Schumann
- 184 **Story**
Christina Waldron
- 193 **Week 13**
Genesis 23
Jeff Waldron
- 205 **Week 14**
Faithfulness of a Servant
Eric Beise
- 215 **Week 15**
God Keeps his Promises
Rachel Beise
- 225 **Week 16**
A Better Man
Mike Schumann
- 234 **Story**
Ashley Vradenburg

Back to the Beginning

Jonathan
Parnell



1

You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you. You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. (Nehemiah 9:6-7)

These are the words of a few Levites in the Book of Nehemiah.

It was later in Israel's history when people had been allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. The whole city—along with the wall—was in ruins. It looked like how you might imagine an ancient city would look if it had been sacked by a vicious army. It was a far cry from the glory that Zion used to possess. Nevertheless, in God's providence, a remnant had returned, and they started putting things back together. They rebuilt the wall in record speed—*if only they could rebuild their hearts*. They knew that was the hardest part.

So they listened to the Book of the Law. A crowd gathered and Ezra read. There was weeping and rejoicing, and then a resolve to be different this time. As the people confessed their sins, the Levites spoke up and recounted the amazing faithfulness of God over their tumultuousness history. *Have we forgotten what the Lord has done for us? Do we remember who he is?*

They take it from the top. . . .

There is only one, true God. His name is the

Lord. He's the Creator of heaven and earth, and of everything little thing there is. He made it all, and keeps it all, and he is worthy of all praise. (He is the God of Genesis 1–11.)

And then, God chose Abram.

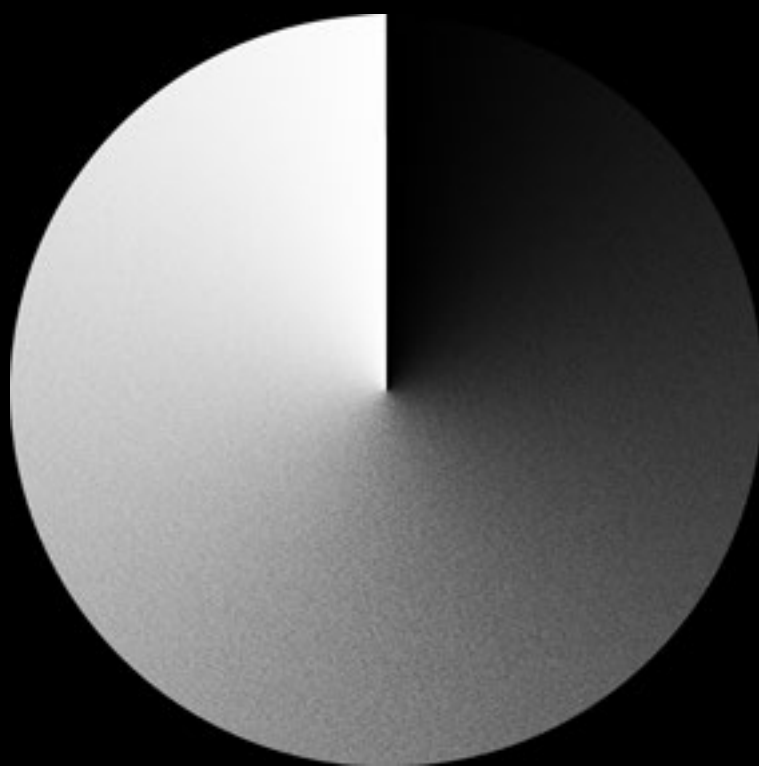
From out in Ur of the Chaldeans, the man was minding his own business, basically, and God went and chose him and gave him the name Abraham.

And so begins redemptive history. The Levites knew it all went back to that moment, back to the call of Abraham. So that's where we're picking up our sermon series this fall—in Genesis 12.

Father, thank you that your grace is historical. You have made it readable. We can see it. We can trace the wonder in the story of your people, and we can trace the wonder in our own lives—and in all the tracing, Jesus gets the glory. Every story is ultimately his story, and so we ask for more of him in this study of Genesis. Make him impossible to ignore, in our hearts, first, and then in the Twin Cities. In his mighty name, amen.

Approaching the Patriarchs

Joe Rigney



5

Time for a Bible Quiz.

1. In Genesis 12, Abram deceives Pharaoh about his wife Sarai, telling the king of Egypt that she was his sister. In this passage Abram is
 - a. A terrible husband, selfish and cowardly.
 - b. A faithful husband, shrewd and wise.
 - c. I have no idea; the Bible is a crazy book.

2. In Genesis 19, Lot attempts to protect his angelic houseguests by offering his unmarried daughters to a rapacious mob. In this passage, Lot is
 - a. A good and faithful host
 - b. A terrible father
 - c. Both A and B
 - d. Seriously, I have no idea. The Bible is a crazy book.

3. In Genesis 22, Abraham attempts to obey God's command to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering. This passage shows that
 - a. God is bloodthirsty and Abraham is insane.
 - b. God is faithful, and Abraham is obedient.
 - c. Faith in God is a leap in the dark that makes no sense.
 - d. I have no idea. I'm just glad God doesn't ask us to do things like this today. Right? Right?

As we begin this sermon series on the patriarchs of Genesis, we're reminded that the Bible is a strange and puz-

zling book. Reading about Abraham and Isaac, Sarah and Rebekah leaves us feeling a bit... disoriented. The Bible tells us that these are men and women of faith who were blessed and approved by God (Hebrews 11), and yet we find some of their actions... puzzling. Troubling. Downright odd and confusing. I already mentioned Abram's sister-wife trick in Genesis 12. And we certainly find his actions in that story strange. But what are we to make of the fact that he pulls the same stunt again in Genesis 20? And that his son Isaac follows in his father's deceptive footsteps in Genesis 26? Does God approve of his servant's actions here? Should we follow in father Abraham's footsteps?

Or what about the story of Lot? He apparently offers his daughters to a mob in order to save his guests from gang rape. What does God think about that? What are we supposed to learn from it? That the inhabitants of Sodom are wicked? That Lot is cowardly? That his daughters should find a new dad? And what do we do with his daughters later in the story when they get their father drunk and sleep with him in order to conceive children? Why does the Bible tell us these stories? And in our own day, the story of Sodom is controversial for a whole host of reasons. What exactly was the sin of Sodom? Homosexuality? Gang Rape? Pride? Inhospitability? All of the above? And what relevance does it have for our contemporary debates about sexuality?

Or what about Sarah and Hagar? Sarah gives Hagar the servant to her husband in order to impregnate her so that they can have an heir. But a

few chapters later, Sarah demands that Abraham cast out the slave woman and her son. What does God think about this? Was Sarah right to take matters into her own hands? Was she right when she exiled Hagar and Ishmael?

And the odd stories keep coming. Jacob buys Esau's birthright for a bowl of stew. The patriarchs quarrel with their neighbors over wells and fields (more than once!). There's a strange negotiation about a tomb for Abraham's wife. God counts Abraham righteous by faith (Hooray! Finally something we can understand) and then a smoking pot and a flaming torch pass between the severed carcasses of some animals and birds (Huh?). And behind and within all of these stories is the Creator God, who calls Abram from a far country, who makes him remarkable promises, who bargains with him over the judgment of the wicked, and who commands him to slaughter his beloved son as a sacrifice. What are we to make of this God?

Obviously these questions aren't easy. And some of them seem to have multiple plausible interpretations. It's possible for different Christians to arrive at different conclusions about the individual stories. Take the sister-wives trick. The common line of interpretation acknowledges the flaws of Abraham and Isaac when they act from fear or take an unwise strategy. They put their own wife at risk rather than protecting her. They are not simple models of faith, but their sins serve as warnings to Israel and to us. On the other hand, an alternate line of interpretation sees the patriarchs being wise as

serpents in their dealings with these pagan nations. Telling half-truths is a way of living among godless tyrants in a shrewd way, as they try to protect their wives and the promise of God. After all, don't they end up with more possessions each time?

Again, these questions aren't easy. And in this series, we will attempt to answer some of them, both through the Quarterly and through the Sunday sermons. To that end, here are a few things to consider as we study Genesis 12–26.

1. DETAILS MATTER

The Bible does not give us a comprehensive account of the events it records. It has a distinct theological message and the stories and details it includes are designed to communicate that theological message. This means that, when the Bible gives us a particular detail, we should pay attention. This includes things like geographical details (like the location of Sarah's tomb or the offering of Isaac), the origin of place names and people names (like Bethel, Beersheba, and Isaac), and genealogical information (like the descendants of Lot and Ishmael). Even when the details are not significant in the immediate story, they are often laying a foundation for future stories in the rest of the Bible. In fact, even the absence of certain details is important. The author of the book of Hebrews finds great significance in the fact that we are not given a genealogy for Melchizedek, given that he is both a king and priest to the true and living God (Hebrews 7).

2. THE PAST MATTERS

We must remember that, while the story of Abraham in Genesis 12 begins a new section of the book of Genesis, it is still a part of the same story that began in Genesis 1. These stories in Genesis 12–26 often hearken back to the earlier stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and his sons. For example, in Genesis 3:15 God establishes a crucial reality that underlies many later passages in the Bible.

“I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring
and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.”

There is a perpetual, divinely established conflict between the woman and the serpent, and it all centers on the offspring of the woman. In fact, from Genesis 3:15 on, the book of Genesis is centrally concerned with the question of this coming offspring who will crush the serpent's head at great cost to himself. One question we should continually ask as we work through Genesis is, “Where is the offspring? Where is the seed of the woman?” And along with it, “Where do we see this conflict between the serpent's offspring and Eve's?” Thus, as we read and study and preach through Genesis 12–26, we should be alert to echoes of the early chapters of Genesis—of new beginnings, and new falls, of blessings and curses, of salvation through judgment.

3. THE FUTURE MATTERS

Not only does Genesis 12–26 hearken back to Genesis 1–11, it also reaches

forward to stories to come. As we noted above, some of the seemingly random details that are included in the stories are meant to set up later narratives. For example, the Moabites and the Ammonites will be central nations in Israel's later history. In Genesis 12–26, we discover their origins. Even more significantly, we can see the beginning of certain patterns that God likes to employ in his dealings with his people. Genesis 12–26 will show the truth of the maxim, “History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme.” For example, in Genesis 12, Abram journeys to Egypt because of a famine. While there, he is oppressed by Pharaoh. God curses Pharaoh and his house, and Pharaoh then sends Abram out of his land, laden with Egyptian wealth. Where have we heard that story before? Or where in the future will we hear it again?

4. THE REST OF SCRIPTURE MATTERS

Of course, the three previous points all echo this point, but it's worth standing on its own: we must interpret Scripture in light of Scripture. This means that we should pay attention to the repeated patterns that show up in the Bible. It also means that we should see where other biblical authors give us insight into how to read these strange passages. For example, Jesus tells his disciples to “Remember Lot's wife” (Luke 17:32). Even more surprisingly, Peter tells us that God “rescued righteous Lot,” who was “greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked” (2 Peter 2:7). How does Peter's description affect the way that we interpret Lot's actions in Sodom? Hebrews 11 gives

us crucial insight into the sometimes puzzling faith of the patriarchs. In Galatians 4, Paul sheds light on the conflict between Isaac and Ishmael (though, to be fair, Paul's allegorical interpretation of Genesis is just as puzzling). Suffice it to say, one of the best ways to grow in our understanding of Genesis 12–26 is to pay attention to cross-references, to see where these stories are referenced elsewhere in Scripture, so that we can be guided by the biblical authors into a greater understanding of the truth.

5. JESUS MATTERS

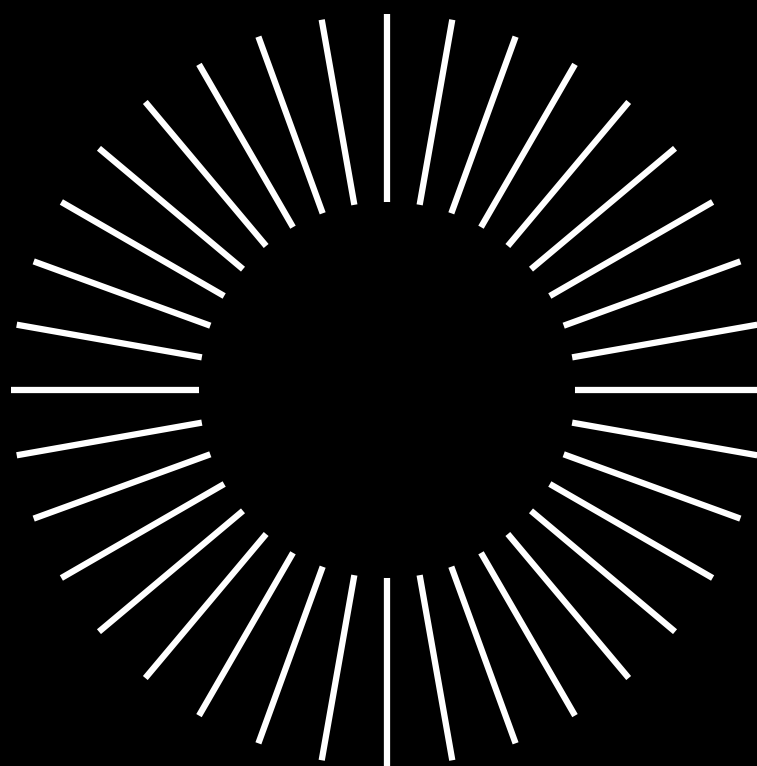
Some things go without saying. But some things that go without saying still need to be said. Jesus is central to Genesis. The entire Old Testament—Law, Prophets, and Writings—is about Jesus. Which means that the stories of Genesis 12–26 are about Jesus. Sometimes, the connections will be obvious. Other times, not so much. But the best way for us to see Jesus in these stories is to labor to understand them in their own context, to see how they flow from Genesis 1–11, how they set up the remainder of Genesis, the Torah, and the rest of the Old Testament, how the little details shed light on the big picture, and how Jesus and the apostles understood the message of these stories. Then, when we've done the hard work of wrestling with the passage (praying always for God to shed light on his word), then perhaps our confusion and disorientation will clear, and, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, our eyes will be opened, our hearts will burn within

us, and we will see Jesus in ways that we've never seen him before.

Week 1

IF YOU ARE
CHRIST'S, THEN YOU
ARE ABRAHAM'S

OFFSPRING,
HEIRS ACCORDING
TO PROMISE.



14

Spoilers

Tom Keefe

For those of us who enjoy reading books or watching movies, there are few things worse than an ill-timed spoiler. I think we've all been there, we are in a conversation with someone about a show or a movie that we haven't seen and they drop a tidbit that gives up vital information regarding a major plot twist or the arc of character and we feel like our future experience is "spoiled."

One of my worst "spoiler" experiences was during my first year of teaching. My students encouraged me to read the *Harry Potter* series for the first time (my mom and dad had banned them from our house growing up), and I was loving it.

In between *The Half-Blood Prince* (Book 6) and *The Deathly Hallows* (Book 7: the final book), I shared my feelings about a plot twist with my students (I won't spoil it) and how it had wrecked me emotionally. Long story short, one student chimed in and shamelessly spoiled the final book for me by telling me how it ended, and I was absolutely devastated.

Yet, as I began to read *The Deathly Hallows*, it became clear that the ill-timed spoiler had not ruined my reading experience. In fact, I discovered that as the narrative raced towards its epic conclusion, I became a more astute reader, focusing on the observations and themes in the text and concentrating less on how I thought the book was going to end.

A 2011 study by two psychologists at the University of California – San Diego confirmed my experience with spoilers. These researchers set up an experiment in which they revealed spoilers to test subjects, and the results of their testing concluded

that spoilers *improve* our enjoyment of a narrative. The study found that "...once you know how it [a story] turns out...you can focus on a deeper understanding of the story."

Though I would not recommend consistently spoiling the endings of movies for your friends, spoilers can be valuable. This is exceedingly true when reading a Biblical narrative. We find that the knowledge we possess about the end of the story, can provide us with spiritual insights and enhance our understanding of a Biblical text, particularly when we are reading the Old Testament.

The story of Abraham, beginning in Genesis 12, is an example of this idea. Genesis 12 opens with the introduction of a new character, Abram (spoiler—his name will change!), who is commanded by the Lord to:

"1 Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3)

Within this text, one can pick up on two promises that God offers to Abram. He promises Abram "the land," and he promises Abram that he will be made into "a great nation."

Now, imagine the original readers (or hearers) of the Genesis account, the Israelites. At this point in the narrative, one would think that a reader may have been guessing how these promises would play out in the life of Abram. But the Israelites already

knew the ending—they were reading it years after it had happened, and they grew up hearing about Abram in the stories passed down from generation to generation.

You *could* say that the story of Abram had been spoiled for original readers. As they read Genesis 12, they already knew that Abram would not enter into the land of promise and call it his home; instead he would become a sojourner and a wanderer. They also knew that Abram's wife would bear him a single child of the promise...a far cry from a great nation.

Yet knowing the end of Abram's story didn't spoil it for the original Israelite reader and it shouldn't spoil it for us today. Instead, the spoilers allow us to refocus our attention on the details—spiritual insights that we can apply to our own lives. Abram did not live his life reliant on the outcome of the promises, but lived a life of faith by trusting the God who made the promises.

These two promises, the promise of the land, and the promise of the nation, frame the rest of the account of Abram (soon to be Abraham) in Genesis and assist us as we understand Abram and even the Patriarchs, overall. Hebrews 11:13b to 14 (another spoiler) tells us:

"They [the Patriarchs] did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own."

The patriarchs "all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them and greeted them from

afar.” They did not inherit Canaan. The promises of God to them were not fulfilled in this life. The hopes which those promises awakened were not realized when they died.

Abram lived a life in obedience to the God of His promises and “welcomed them [the promises] from a distance.” Franz Delitzsch provides this gem to help us understand Hebrews 11:13, “The image is that of sailors who, catching a glimpse of the shores they wish to reach, salute them from a distance.”

If you think about it, God has already spoiled the end of our story for us. Abram is a flawed man who makes many mistakes on his journey through life yet as we read and hear about Abram/Abraham over the course of our sermon series, we will see that the narrative is filled with evidence that Abram believed the blessings God promised him and anticipated the possession of those blessings.

It also can be identified that we live with a similar tension that is evidenced in the life of Abram. God has given us glorious promises regarding the return of Jesus and the promise of the New Jerusalem or heaven and, like Abram, the knowledge of the promises about the end of our journey does not “spoil” it but fills us with hope. Though we will fall short, we respond with faith and obedience in responding to the true Author of our story.

Day 1

- ① Read Genesis 12. What did God promise Abram? What does God mean when he says that he will bless Abram? How does Genesis 12 mark a change in Genesis from negative (chapters 3–11) to positive?

- ② Read Genesis 12:1–3. Our “name” is significant. We all love to hear our name praised, our name mentioned, our name spoken well of. What was the problem in Genesis 11:4? Whose name is great in Psalm 8:1 and how is this such a paradigm shift for us? Whose name is greatest? (See Philippians 2:9–11). Who gives Abram a great name in Gen. 12:2 and why is this significant?

- ③ Read Genesis 12:1–3. What does God invite Abram to do? What challenges did Abram face by accepting the invitation? What did Abram need to do in order to listen to God?

- ④ Read Genesis 12:1–3. God has a vision for all the families of the earth. How does this relate to Matthew 28:18–20, Acts 1:8, and Galatians 3:8?

- ⑤ Read Genesis 12:1–3. The skeptic would be right in questioning these promises. What obstacles do you see as barriers to God being able to fulfill these promises?

Day 2

- 1 Read Genesis 12:4–6. Abram embarked on the way to greatness, through the path of self-sacrifice. Describe what sacrifices Abram made when he “went.”

- 2 Read Genesis 12:7–9. What was one of the first things Abram did when he got to the land? What does this tell us about Abram’s life? Do you worship God throughout your day? How so?

- 3 Read Genesis 12:10. Soon after Abram gets settled, problems arise. In what ways could Abram have been frustrated by this outcome? Have you had that experience? You start out on something convinced it is God’s will and soon things start to fall apart. What do you think God is up to in these moments?

- 4 Read Genesis 12:10–20. In the Old Testament, going down to Egypt is often linked with not trusting God. Review God’s promises to Abram. What happens in this going to Egypt that puts into jeopardy the fulfilling of these promises?

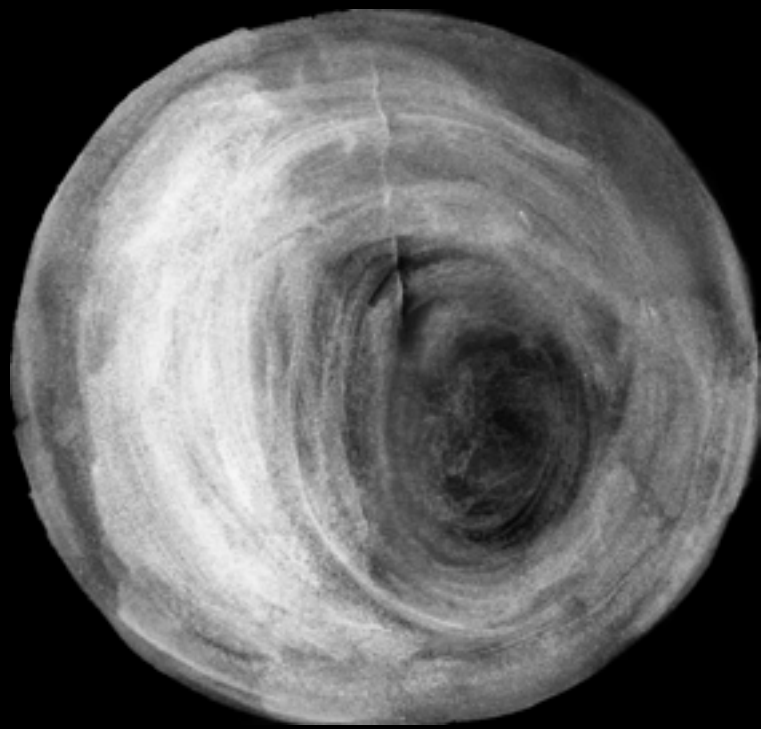
- 5 Read Genesis 12:10–20. Abram was gone from the Promised Land, Sarai was lost to Pharaoh, and instead of Abram being a blessing to the nations, and God had to inflict serious diseases on Pharaoh to fix Abram’s mess. What did Abram receive (Genesis 12:16)? Was it worth it? Describe why following God’s plan/call is better than earthly gain.

Day 3

- ① Genesis 12 is a pointer to Christ. Study Galatians 3:16. The promises made to Abram already have Christ in view. Abram functions as a miniature picture of Christ ahead of time. Review Genesis 12 and draw out parallels between Abram and Jesus. See Philippians 2:6–10, Ephesians 1:3–14, Psalm 2:9, and Matthew 25:41–43. Unlike Abram who told a lie to save his life, Jesus told the truth knowing it would cost him his life.
- ② Egypt was a constant source of temptation to Abram, and later to Israel, whenever they doubted God's goodness or ability to keep his promises. To what do you turn when things go wrong and you doubt God's love and power? How is Christ the answer?

Sermon Notes

Week 1



24

Learning to
Live on God's
Promises

David Mathis

Abram had his ups and downs. He didn't go from moon-worship to mature monotheist overnight. He didn't have Christian parents or a solid Christian community. He didn't even have a Bible. He had a promise from God (Genesis 12:1-3)—just a simple one, not a whole Book of them like we have today—and that's all he had to go on at first. How easy it is for us today to take for granted all that God has given us for walking in faith and godliness: his word, the church, and his Holy Spirit.

We shouldn't be surprised that Abram had some hard falls as he was learning to fly. He has his remarkable moments of faith, yes, as we've seen in Genesis 12:4 ("Abram went, as the Lord had told him") and as we will see climactically in Genesis 22, and even as we see here in Genesis 13 in his open-handedness with his nephew, Lot. Rightly does the New Testament celebrate Abraham, as he will come to be called (Genesis 17:5), as a "man of faith" (Galatians 3:9; also Hebrews 11:8, 17), even with his gaffs and guffaws.

ABRAM'S FAITH

Abram encounters another trial in Genesis 13. This will be the pattern of his life: obstacle, then advance. Famine tests him in chapter 12; now tension with extended family in chapter 13.

Abram's herds and those of his nephew have become so large that "the land could not support them dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together, and there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen

of Lot's livestock" (13:6-7). Here's the test: Will Abram live in light of God's promise ("To your offspring I will give this land," Genesis 12:7), or will he scheme, deceive, or attempt to sieve it for himself in some way? Will he walk by faith, trusting in God's promise, or will he walk by sight, leaning on his own understanding and resources?

This time, with an open hand, and confidence in the promises of God, he generously defers to Lot. You pick. "If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left" (13:9).

LOT'S FOLLY

Lot chooses what looks like the best land, and in doing so, he turns his back on Canaan, the promised land. While Abram looks, by faith, to the unseen divine promises, Lot lifts up his human eyes and sees how good the Jordan Valley looks (13:10). But beware appearances. The narrator inserts this ominous parenthesis: "This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah."

The Jordan Valley may look good on the outside, but it is desperately sick inside. It may look like Eden from afar, but its people are "wicked, great sinners against the Lord" (13:13). (In the whole Bible, the phrase "great sinners," as compared to just "sinners," appears only here; chapters 18-19 will explain more.)

It is only a matter of time until God's judgement falls, and what looked so good to Lot on the surface will become a wasteland. "Lot, when he fancied he was living in paradise," writes John Calvin, "was nearly plunged into the depths of hell."

ABRAM'S REWARD

After Lot has departed, God then speaks to Abram and extends his promises of land and descendants. They are now much fuller. Originally, God promised to give Abram's offspring the land of Canaan. Now he promises, "All the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever" (13:15). And formerly, God promised to make Abram "a great nation." Now he amplifies the promise, "I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted" (13:16).

In the coming chapters, we will see how it plays out for Lot, on the one hand, and for Abram, on the other, after this great fork in the road. As for us, one of several good questions we can ask ourselves is this: How much are we living by human appearances, as opposed to divine promises? Will we walk by faith in God's spectacular as-yet-unseen promises, or will we be snookered by what only our physical eyes can see? Will we make life's key decisions by looking at outward appearances, or will we look, by faith, as God looks, on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7)?

As Christians, we have all the more reason for this not to be lost on us. We owe our very life to God not operating by the world's expectations and patterns, but in the peculiar glory of his surprising grace:

Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to

shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

Day 1

- ① Read Genesis 13. What new facts do we learn about Abram and Lot?

- ② Read Genesis 13:1–4. How does Abram respond to his failure in Genesis 12:10–20? What does this tell us about his faith?

- ③ Read Genesis 13:1–4. Abram systematically reverses his tracks (Genesis 13:1/12:9, 13:3/12:8, 13:4/12:8). Give an example where you have failed in your walk with Jesus. Did this failure drive you away from God or back to square one (calling on the name of the Lord)?

- ④ Read Genesis 13:1–4. Those who trust in God and follow Jesus repent and turn back to God when they fail. How does Psalm 37:23 help us see this dynamic? Everyone fails, but what's different about a Christian failing?

- ⑤ Read Genesis 13:1–4. How did Abram set us a good example of how to deal with spiritual failure? How was his response different from that of Adam and Eve after they disobeyed in the Garden of Eden? See Genesis 3:8–13.

Day 2

- ① Read Genesis 13:5–7. What new test is Abram facing?

- ② Read Genesis 13:2. Riches solve few problems and can easily become a major obstacle to our spiritual growth. If you became incredibly wealthy, would you still study your Bible? Would millions of dollars change your relationship with God? How? What do we learn from Jesus about riches in Luke 12:13–21?

- ③ Read Genesis 13:8–13. What is your analysis of how well Abram handled this situation with Lot? How does this compare with how you would have handled the situation with Lot? What do you believe allowed Abram to act this way?

- ④ Read Genesis 13:10. How did Lot make his decision, and what sins tempt us today in the same way? What foreshadowing exists in this verse about Lot's choice? Note a progression in Lot in the following verses: 13:10; 13:12; 14:12; 19:1; 19:14.

- ⑤ Read Genesis 13:14–18. How does God respond to Abram's choice?

Day 3

- ① Study Philippians 4:12–13. What does it mean to be content at all times? How do you get to that place? Why does Paul refer to it as “learning the secret of being content”?
- ② Describe some areas of your life where you are not content right now. How does the gospel address this lack of contentment?

Sermon Notes

34 Fight to Free the Captives
Zach Krych

42 Story
Jessica Hansen

Week 3

Fight to Free the Captives

Zach Krych



35

Here we have here the first war recorded in Scripture. The gist of it is this: five kings who ruled their cities in the Jordan Valley, which is on the edge of the promised land, had been forced to pay tribute to four kings of distant regions that were near where Abram had originated. After twelve years of paying, the five kings rebelled, which caused the four kings to sweep through the entire region and re-conquer the land. However, this war would have disappeared into history if not for the greater story of faith moving through the background. Lot, Abram's nephew, was taken captive by the four kings.

God had recently promised Abram that he would "make (him) into a great nation" and "all the families of the Earth will be blessed through (him)" Genesis 12:2-3. And we are left wondering, "Will Abram trust God's ability and faithfulness to keep His covenant?" "Will he live by fear or by faith?" Throughout the rest of the narrative we see Abram oscillating between fear and faith. Thankfully, we have a brief but shining example of Abram's faith and graciousness when he rescues Lot from the four kings in Chapter 14.

Why is this an example of faith? Remember how Lot got in this situation. In Chapter 13, Abram graciously gave Lot the choice on where he would live, and Lot chose to live near Sodom out of a desire for its appearance and wealth. Now, in Chapter 14 this desire has drawn him into the city proper, even though Sodom's wickedness was in full view. Lot was drawn to the possessions of this world, and it made him vulnerable to attack from the enemy, but Abram still fought for

him. Abram didn't let Lot's selfishness be an excuse to let him suffer. Abram didn't say, "You chose Sodom, now get your reward." Instead, upon hearing of Lot's pain, he mustered his 318 trained men and divided them by night, planning a stealthy attack, and overthrew a vastly more numerous enemy. Why did he think he could win against the four kings who were fresh off victory? Abram wasn't foolish, but was living by faith that God would make him into a great nation, so he worked with what he had, 318 men.

Where are our 318 trained men? Do we have faith that God can use our meager number to free the thousands captive by sin in the Twin Cities? God did it here with Abram, he did it with Gideon's 300 men in Judges 7, and He can do it with us. Will we bravely divide at night, purposefully and carefully planning our rescue missions together?

We can fight for the captives, as Abram did, because we know the battle is the Lord's, and He is the ultimate Emancipator. The victory is His. And at first glance it almost seems that Abram's rescue was a failure since Lot went right back to Sodom, right back into the city of sin. But Lot was not the same. Abram had always been an example of faith to Lot, and risking his life to save him was likely the greatest example yet, for we know Lot began to feel the weight of Sodom's wickedness. His eyes were opening to the contrast between light and darkness, and he began to grow in righteousness, for 2 Peter 2:7,8 tells us that before the later destruction of Sodom "he (God) rescued righteous Lot, who was greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as

that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard)." The desire for wealth that drew Lot to Sodom had seemed to slip away and the weight of the people's sin bore down on him. Abram's daring rescue likely served as a wake up call for him to open his eyes.

Lord, let us free those who have been taken captive, those who are held by the enemy. Even those who are captive because they selfishly chose to be near the wicked in hope of worldly gain.

This was the first war we see in the Bible but it is not by far the last. In fact, God will send angels to make war against Sodom and Gomorrah and destroy them, but not quite yet. This first war can be seen as a gracious warning to Sodom and Gomorrah to repent. Jesus showed us that suffering is intended to wake people up and bring repentance when He said, in Luke 13 "unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Sodom and Gomorrah's infamous destruction by fire from the sky does not come without a few "warning shots" from the Lord. The Lord had mercy on Lot this day, by having Abram rescue him, and He would have mercy on him again by sending angels to rescue him. Let us learn from Abram and be a people who rescue the captives at great risk to ourselves, working hard and trusting the Lord for the victory.

Day 1

- ① Read Genesis 14:1–16. We see a typical cycle of a king. There are his enemies he fights with and also his subjects that rise in rebellion. Which kings are allies, and who is fighting whom? How does Lot get pulled into all this?
- ② How does Abram react to the capture of Lot and what does he do about it?
- ③ Lot was caught up in the fighting almost by accident, except for the fact he was there for his own material gain (13:10). Lot is experiencing a period of decline. How would you treat Lot if you were Abram?
- ④ At issue is a broader theological question—will a righteous man that dwells in the midst of the wicked get caught up in their destruction? How do you think through this in the neighborhood you live in?
- ⑤ Abram’s only family was Lot. The promised lineage was given to Abram. Describe the risks Abram and Lot are taking through the decisions they are making and how might their decisions risk the promises of God? Contrast this with 1 Samuel 14:6.

Day 2

- ① Read Genesis 14:1–16. Does Lot deserve Abram’s help? Is there personal risk to Abram in helping Lot? Explain.

- ② In your personal daily life, do you intervene in a situation if the person doesn’t deserve your help and if there is personal risk to you and/or your family? How do you think through this?

- ③ People matter. In light of the previous question, read all of Matthew 5 and write out which top three verses apply to this situation and help us think through this daily challenge.

- ④ How did Jesus answer these two questions: Do they deserve to be helped and is there personal risk to me in helping them? What did Jesus do about it? Write out and meditate on Romans 5:6–8.

- ⑤ Read Luke 10:25–37. In what ways can you be the Good Samaritan in your neighborhood?

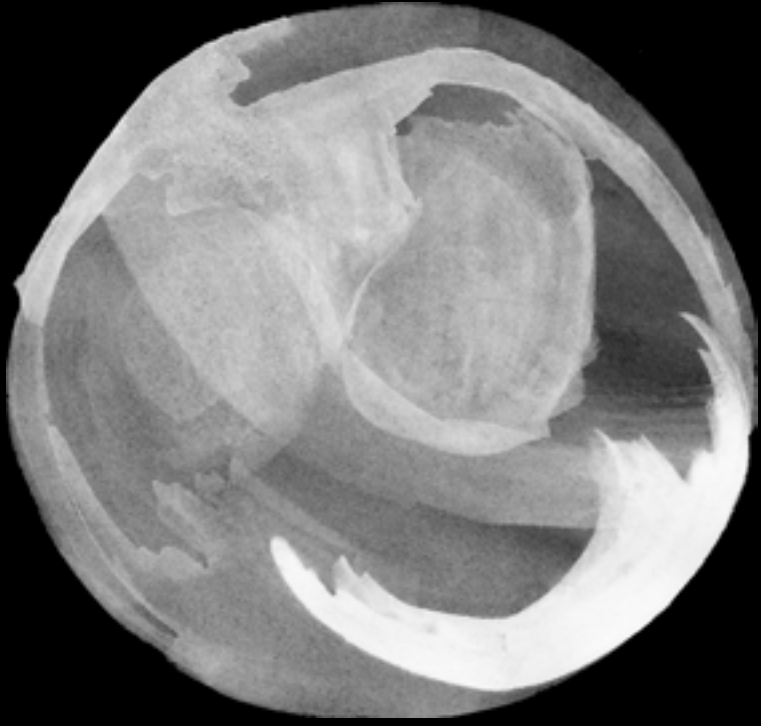
Day 3

- ① Ready and study 2 Peter 2:4–9.

- ② This truth is a comfort to all of us who must live in the real world of difficult decisions and hard choices. Yet, Lot's story also provides a challenge to those of us who live too comfortably alongside those who are of an entirely different spirit. Which side do you tend to fall out on? What truth can you apply to help correct those embedded patterns?

Sermon Notes

巴 里 街 門 牌 一 號



“I don’t believe you.” Not quite the reaction I was expecting. It was my freshman year in college at the University of St. Thomas and I was sitting in my little dorm room with some girls on my floor that I had gotten to know that fall. I was telling them about what I was like in high school. The drugs I did. The encounters with police. The person I was. It was hard for them to believe because of how much I had changed.

The Jessica they met in college was involved in Bible studies, didn’t go to parties, and was super happy. But the Jessica I told them about was sleeping around,

smoking, doing drugs, depressed; nothing like who they met in college.

As we talked, I continued to share about what it was that caused this change in me from high school to college. I explained how after a series of difficult things happening in my life during high school, I started doing drugs a lot and drinking. I got very depressed, and eventually I hit rock bottom and got to the point where I didn't want to live anymore. I prayed and said "God if you're real, then show me, because I don't want to do this anymore." I was so filled with pain and confused about who I was, I did not see

the point in living anymore. In that moment is when God came to me in such a clear way. It was a moment I will never forget. In that exact moment of my desperation and need, God came to me. I felt an overwhelming sense of joy. Peace. Love. A burst of bright light and hope filled my heart. Immediately I got up and turned on 98.5 (a Christian radio station) and, I kid you not, it was the first note of the song "Amazing Grace." I then rummaged through some things in my room and found a Bible, sat down on my bed, and started to read.

That's when things started to change. I began reading the Bible all the time. I thought, "Well I know God is real, so I better change my life around!" No more drugs and parties.

When I was a little girl I had asked Jesus "into my heart" and went to church on and off with my family growing up, but this was different. This time I had really experienced "God with me" and there was now no question about whether God was real or not. I found hope I hadn't had before. God met me in a very real way and there was no way I could continue to live

the way I was living with this awareness that God is watching everything I do.

I stopped all the stuff I was doing that I knew God didn't approve of, and started living the way the Bible told me I should.

When I got into college I asked where all the Bible studies were and (you betcha) I went to practically all of them on campus. The Catholic ones, CRU, Gospel choir, Peer Ministry, and then one day I met this lady on staff with a college ministry called Campus Outreach.

We developed a friendship and through our time together and the Spirit

at work, it clicked for me—being a Christian didn't mean "getting my life together." It wasn't just doing the right things and not doing the bad things. The Gospel became real and clear to me. Jesus died to save sinners. Sinners! Being a Christian did not mean "going to Bible study" or "not doing drugs." It was not about what I was doing or not doing, but about what Jesus did on the cross and resting in that. I was really trying to earn God's love by behaving the right way.

Throughout college I grew in my understanding of the gospel, and now at 26 years old, I am still learning about what

the gospel actually means for my day to day life. In moments where I am impatient with my daughter, or short with my husband, I know that God does not love me less than on the days where I'm the most gracious and loving wife and mother. I continually need reminding that God, my Father, is not looking for perfection. He is looking at my heart. He wants me to come to Him, in moments when I have zero patience with my daughter, or when I'm short to my husband, and ask for help.

Ten years later, the "lure" to fall into the pattern of this world looks different for me now. Instead of the "best high,"

it's the "perfect home" or the best home-cooked meal. I struggle to see that Jesus is better than those things. But I am fighting to believe the truth that the purpose of my life is not to make much of me, but make much of God! I pray that I will continue to live my life in a way where people will look at my life and see that there has to be a God. Not because of how much changing I have done myself, but rather how much God has changed me through his wonderful Gospel.

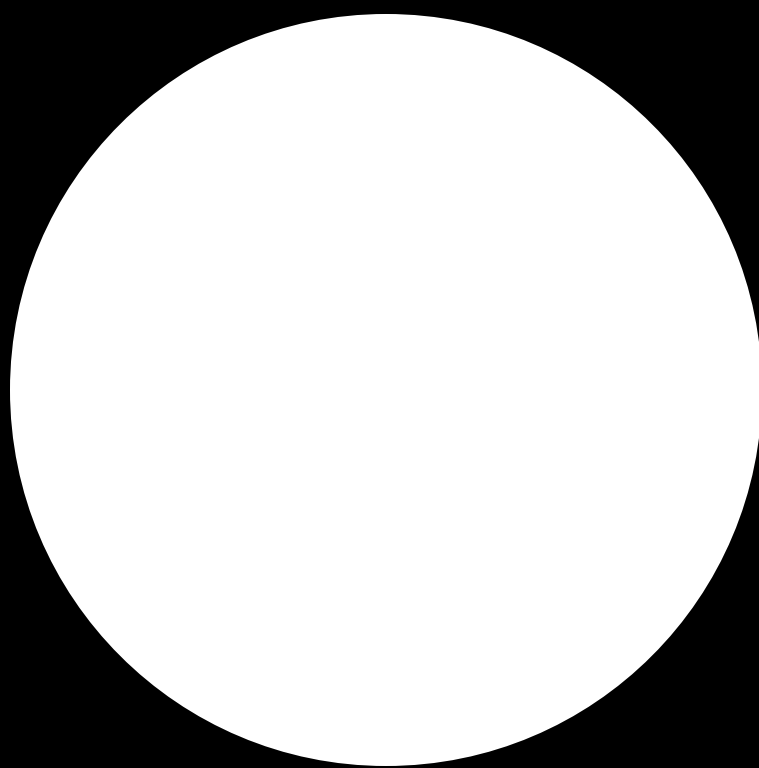
56 How Quick Are You?
Michelle Griep

64 Story
Eric Beise

Week 4

How Quick Are You?

Michelle Griep



55

I have a confession: it takes me forever to read the Old Testament. It's hard to slog through genealogies of people with weird names that I can't even guess at how to pronounce. Such is the case—frequently—in the book of Genesis. I mean Chedorlaomer? Really?

But there's a benefit to reading slowly. It's harder to gloss over words, and it makes you think. In just one short passage you can find lots of things to mull over. Recently I hung out in Genesis 14:17–24, and despite my slow reading, I learned from Abram that there are some things we should all be quick about.

HOW QUICK ARE YOU TO TURN TO GOD AFTER A VICTORY?

We've all been there, if we're honest. Maybe you won an award at work and soaked in all the applause and back-slapping before you even thought to thank God. Or let's say your kid took first place in a sports competition. Would you praise that child like nobody's business and let everyone know that's your little darling before or after you first thanked God?

Turns out Abram was in just such a situation. He defeated the mighty Chedorlaomer, which was quite the victory. But before he struck up the band and paraded home beneath a snowstorm of confetti and balloons, he first turned to God. Okay, so he really didn't have a parade planned in the first place, but even if he had, I have no doubt he'd have his priorities straight. What Abram did was immediately show his deep gratitude for

such a great victory by giving to God a tenth of everything he'd taken.

It's easy to get caught up in the excitement of a success, especially one you worked hard for, but keep in mind you wouldn't have had that success were it not for God's grace. Be quick to thank Him first.

HOW QUICK ARE YOU TO TURN TO GOD AFTER A TRAGEDY?

This is the flip side. Sometimes when disaster strikes, instead of turning to God we turn away from Him. The loss of a job. The death of a loved one. Cancer. As humans it's not just hard to wrap our minds around things we don't understand, it's impossible.

And that's when faith gets real.

Choosing to turn to God in tragic situations is the only hope we have. *He* is the only hope we have. There's no guarantee that things will turn out how you want them to in life, and in fact most often they don't. The only certainty is this: God is good. When a tragedy hits, that is a hard one to believe—but it's even harder to live without trusting in His great love and compassion for us.

HOW QUICK ARE YOU TO TURN DOWN A PROFIT FOR THE SAKE OF GIVING GOD THE GLORY?

Money. Face it, Christian, as much as you like to think you're some kind of special holy rock star, if you're offered a fat bank account, you'd have a hard time turning it down. And it would be even harder to say no if you felt you'd earned that money.

When Abram toodled home from his big win, he hauled with him some serious swag, but he let it go...*all* of it. Who does that? After nearly killing yourself for a treasure, would you give it up so easily? What was wrong with this dude?

Turns out nothing was wrong with Abram—he was right. He said, “I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’”

Abram let it all go because he didn't want anyone to think—most of all himself—that he'd made himself rich. He felt it was better to wait on God to bless him with riches. And he was right. It is better to receive from God than to grasp for things on your own because it will keep you from getting proud and arrogant.

HOW QUICK ARE YOU TO SHARE IN OTHERS' VICTORIES INSTEAD OF FEELING JEALOUS ABOUT THEM?

This one hits home. As an author, whenever one of my writer buddies gets a larger advance or a prestigious award, I can't deny a little twinge of envy. But worse is when a rookie writer comes along who pens a story no better than a five-year-old and lands a fat contract with a top publisher. That's when jealousy kicks in with a sharp kidney punch.

Wow, do Abram and Melchizedek have an example for all of us to follow.

Melchizedek, who's name means King of Righteousness, was a king of Salem and priest of the Most High God—a pretty high-ranking person

for that time. Yet he made the effort to come out and meet Abram, presenting him with bread and wine and blessing him. He didn't have to do that. Or he could've waited until Abram returned home. But he didn't. He celebrated Abram's great victory as if it were his own. I admit it: this is a tough act to pull off with sincere joy.

But good news. If you ask God even now to help you *before* the situation comes up, He is faithful to work in your heart and attitudes.

And speaking of attitudes, next time you're dreading flipping open the Bible to a section of the Old Testament because you know it's going to take you forever to read, give yourself permission to go slow. You just might learn a few quick lessons.

Day 1

- ① Read Genesis 14. Abram wins a significant battle in the region in which he lives. When he returns he faces two different kings. Make some observations contrasting these two kings.

- ② As the winner, Abram is faced with either of two responses, as offered by each of the two kings. Abram could choose the humble obedience of faith in and obedience to God (Melchizedek) or choose the get-rich-quick scheme (Sodom). How did Abram's response to the two kings fulfill God's promise to Abram in Genesis 12:2-4?

- ③ Abram recognizes that the victory was God's and offers a tithe. He does not take rewards from wicked people (Sodom). Abram could have shortcut God's promises and took the land and the wealth through Sodom, but he didn't. He trusted God to deliver on his own time. Describe a victory you've had. How did you respond? How does this story of Abram help guide our responses to "wins"?

- ④ Continuing the thought of the previous questions, we are looking at how we can compromise on our faith and morals to receive gifts that we say are from God, but are not obtained in the right manner, nor received with the right attitude. Satan loves to offer plausible shortcuts to bring us good ends an easier way. What examples do you see in your life where this temptation exists? How do you handle it? Examples could be: sexuality, business ethics, giving, or praise.

- ⑤ Lot shared the fate of the Sodomites because he lived close to them. How are you affected by the choices you make concerning friends, workplace, church, and living arrangements?

Day 2

- ① Read Hebrews 6:19–7:28. Melchizedek is a mysterious figure. List the top three things you learn about Melchizedek.

- ② Read Hebrews 6:19–7:3. As we read through Genesis, this man Abram becomes a key person in the narrative. Yet, Melchizedek here is clearly greater than Abram. We also learn from Hebrews that Melchizedek prefigures Christ. How is Melchizedek shown to be a priest forever? What does this teach us about Jesus?

- ③ Read Hebrews 7:4–10. It is striking in the Genesis 14 narrative that Abram submits to Melchizedek. Why is it significant that Abram and the upcoming priests (lineage of Levites) are submitting to Melchizedek? What does this teach us about Jesus in relation to the priestly order of the Levites? Hint: if you start your answer with “Jesus is better” you are on the right track.

- ④ What point is the author making in Hebrews 7:11 (use 7:11–22, and Psalm 110:4)? How does the story of Melchizedek help solidify this point?

- ⑤ Read Hebrews 7:22–28. The function of the priesthood in the OT (as carried out by the tribe of Levi) was to deal with sin. They would carry out all the animal sacrifices. Israelites would go to the priest on certain days, feasts, festivals, etc. and offer sacrifices through the priest. The point of Genesis 14 and Hebrews 7 is that Melchizedek points to Jesus as being the more superior high priest. Why do we need a superior high priest? See the sentiment of Micah 6:6–7.

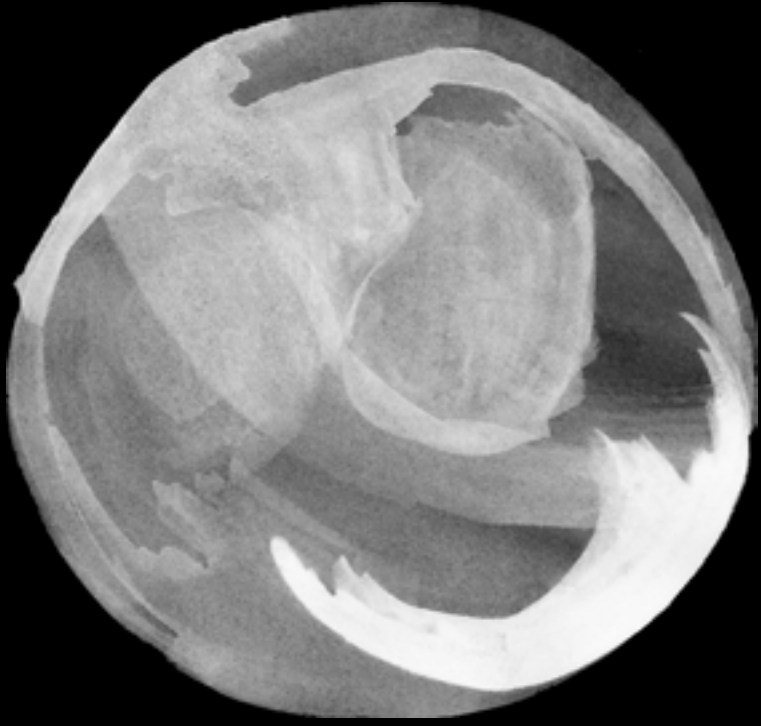
Day 3

① Read and study Hebrews 7:25.

② Read and study Romans 8:34–35.

Sermon Notes

道 德



I grew up in a Christian home. Both my mom and dad are believers. We were the church-going, bedside-prayer praying family. I went to a Christian elementary and middle school. We had religion class where (I'm pretty sure) the Gospel was taught. From the outside, I was a pretty good Christian. I knew the right words to say. I knew what I wasn't supposed to do (and most of the time didn't do it). I knew about Jesus and that he died for me. Still, I really had no idea what being a Christian meant.

Through high school I lived my life under some strange combo of moralistic

theology and a sprinkling of “grace” for when I couldn’t live up to that theology. Even calling it a theology might be giving it too much credit. My religion was a paper-thin, washed-down version of nominal Christianity. I wanted to go to heaven, and I believed God existed, but that made no material impact on how I lived.

In college, my paper-thin faith proved to be no faith at all. When my shelter bubble was popped, and I had to answer questions about how I wanted to live and why, I crumbled under the pressure of the world. Worldly things slowly chipped away at any morality that I had. I com-

promised nearly every conviction I once held. I was in a state of moral decay, but I could not feel it.

To the outside world, I had everything I could have ever wanted. I had a good family background, I was one of the student leaders of the rowing team, I had plenty of friends, we partied on weekends, school came easy, I graduated with a business degree, and I had the promise of a corporate job. My friends and I frequently went to the bar to get drunk and pick up women. This was the “good life,” right?

After a couple of years, I slowly fell into a bit of despair. I had no friends that

actually cared about me, I had manipulated just about any romantic relationship I had ever been in, and finally I realized I didn't have it all figured out. One morning, while driving to work, I hit my rock bottom. I didn't really see a purpose to anything. The way I saw it, I could live for another 60 years, be super successful, find a wife, have 1.5 kids, a goldendoodle, and a white picket fence around my lawn, yet it all had no real worth. I finally came before the Lord and said, "Okay Jesus, if you're real, I'm in. I will do whatever you want. I don't know how following you works at all. Show me what you want

me to do. Give me friends who know how this works.” It was immediately after that prayer that I could feel a physical weight of despair being lifted off my physical shoulders. There was a newfound peace in me. I remember hearing the Lord at that point, but I don’t remember what He said, or if I heard through my heart or my ears. Either way, it felt reassuring. The whole experience was surreal, yet seemed totally normal. I finished up my drive to work and went about my day.

Less than a week later, a friend at work invited me to church and introduced me to a bunch of her church friends. Slow-

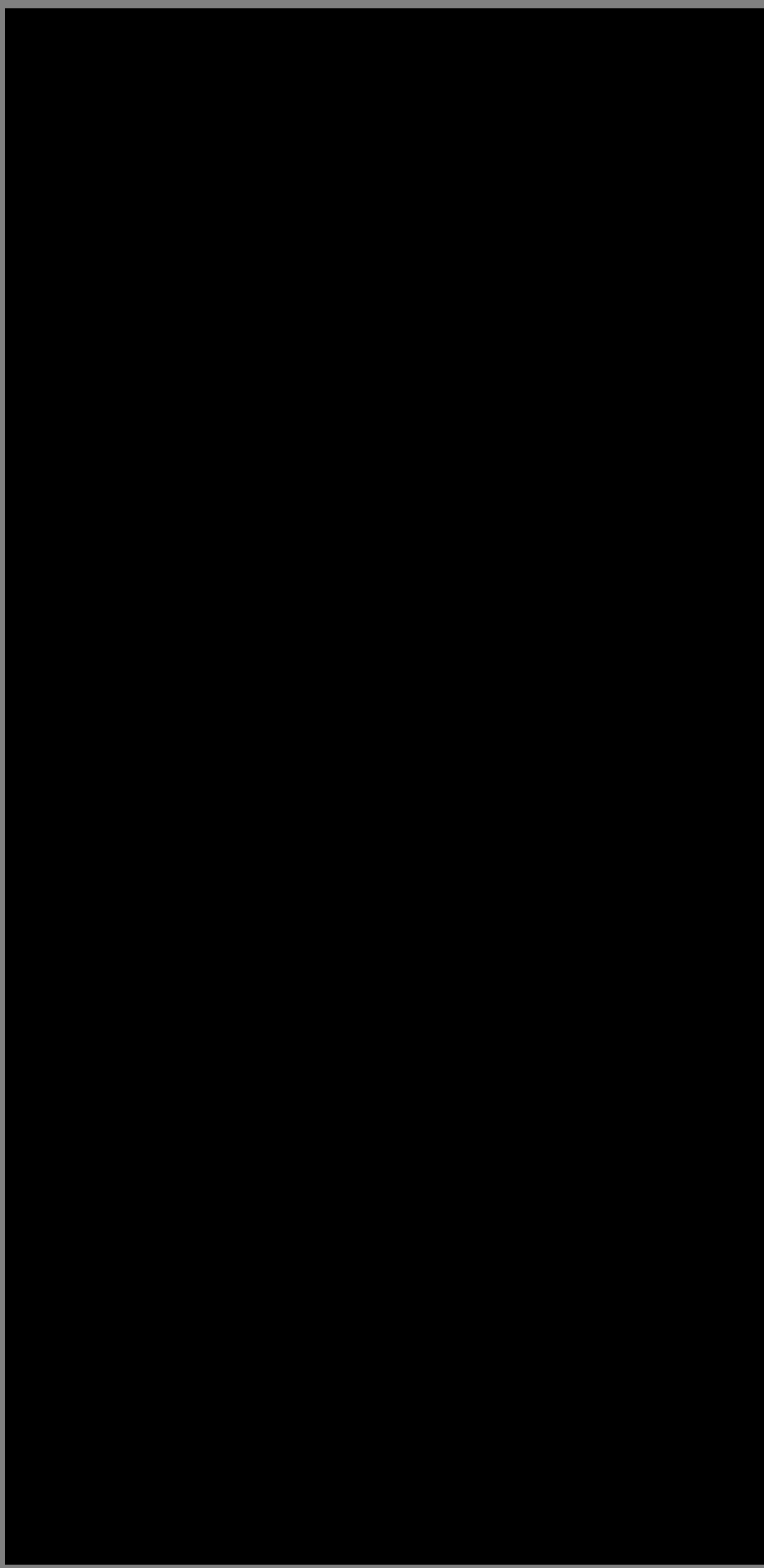
ly, the Lord started providing friends that could model for me what being a Christian meant. Within the year, my now wife, Rachel, introduced me to Michael Thiel and we started studying the Bible together. The Lord answered and continues to answer my prayers from that drive to work in deeper and more impactful ways than I could have ever imagined.

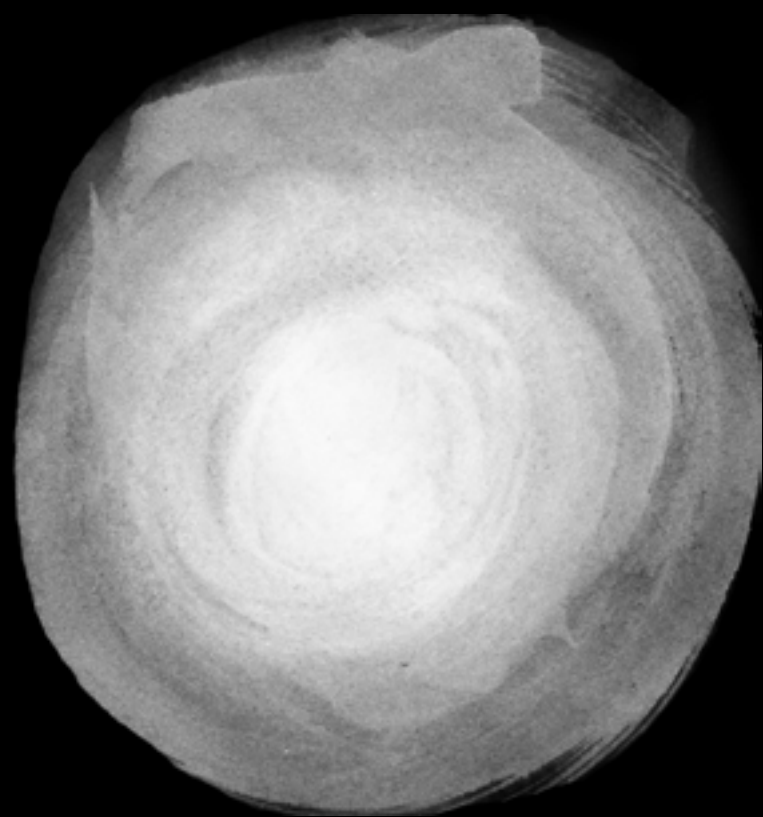
Week 5

NOT ONE WORD
OF ALL THE GOOD
PROMISES THAT
THE LORD HAD

MADE TO THE
HOUSE OF ISRAEL
HAD FAILED; ALL
CAME TO PASS.

Is God's Presence and Promise Enough?





Sometimes I envy the past. I'm not talking about my past, or the good old days that our parents or ourselves talk about, but the distant past of the Old Testament. For whatever reason, things just seemed simpler. Moses would speak to God and hear Him respond. In Genesis 15, God spoke to Abram in a vision. Now I'm not totally sure what it would be like to be Abram speaking with God in a vision, but it still seems a lot more clear than some of the ways God has spoken to me. Did Abram wonder if it was just his imagination, or was he confident it was the Lord without hesitation? However Abram felt, he believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

I tend to think if God spoke to me like that, I would believe Him too, and faith would be a little easier. I'm not saying Abram's life was going to be easy—he did almost sacrifice his son trusting that God would raise him from the dead—but I can still be fooled at times to think his life was a little clearer. We all want clarity, don't we? So many of my fears and doubts come from a lack of clarity or understanding. Couldn't God just let me in a little more on His plan for my life or His purpose in my current circumstances? He may very well answer that prayer, but often He loves me too much to give into my seemingly innocent request. So what has He given us and why won't He give us more?

There are two things given to Abram in Genesis 15:1. First the Lord says: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield." The Lord here tells Abram that His presence will be with Him, and He will protect Him. Second, He promises that Abram's "reward

shall be very great". The rest of the chapter continues on in more detail to show that God has not only given a promise to Abram, but also makes a covenant to reassure him that the Lord will surely do it. God has also given these very same things to us today. Not only has He given them, but He actually has *more clearly* given them. Jesus has prayed for us (Jn. 17:20), and has promised to be with us always (Matt. 28:20). Christ's presence isn't just with us but He is in us. Paul in his letters explains that we have the Mind of Christ (2 Cor. 2:16) and the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9). Paul also says that the mystery that has been hidden for ages has now been revealed to the saints (Col.1:26). And Jesus, at the last supper with His disciples, said: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." (Jn. 15:15) The list could go on and on about the ways that we not only have what Abram had, but that we have been given more, more of His presence, a more excellent and better promise (Heb. 8:6), and more clarity on the now-revealed gospel and its global mission.

If this is all true, what stands in my way of believing it, embracing it, resting in it? So what's wrong with my sight? I think several things:

1. I am farsighted: It is easier to believe a promise of God for someone else than for myself. The closer the circumstance gets to my family, or my life, the harder it can be to believe and clearly see God's plan as a good thing. Have you ever found yourself able to

counsel a friend through challenges that you struggle with yourself? They may feel really helped by you, and probably were, but you struggle to take your own advice, and it seems a little harder for your circumstances versus theirs. But if the gospel is true, we can stand on its firm foundation even when we don't see that foundation as clear as we would like.

2. I am shortsighted: It's too easy to only see this moment, and if this moment is everything, it's overwhelming. How quickly I can forget the clear provisions of God in the past, the answered prayers, the unknown circumstances that worked out just fine, the fears that were strongly felt but didn't come to fruition. We can learn a lesson from Abram here as well. In our culture, waiting a long time has a totally different meaning. I think a long time is weeks, months, or somewhat of an eternity of a couple years. If my circumstance has lasted *this* long, certainly, I have a good reason or two to doubt. Yet Abram waited 75 years when God promised to bless the nations through him, and 25 years later, Sarah gave birth to Isaac. God doesn't work on my time frame or at my pace. But He is faithful and has been faithful in many ways, I just need to take time to see them and remember them.

3. Last, I'm just too focused on sight. Scripture does in fact say "We walk by faith and not by sight." I don't need faith if I have sight. I don't need to trust Him if I have a plan or see a clear purpose. We often want to walk by sight because that just seems easier. We trust God at times often because

we need to rather than want to. But God loves us too much to give us the sight we want. If that sight will draw us away from dependence on Him to trust in ourselves, it is a grace that He withholds it. It isn't just good for us to trust Him but it is the best for us, most joyful for us, most peaceful for us. We don't need more of this type of sight, we need more faith.

May God correct the eyes of our heart to see *Him* more clearly and believe Him more fully.

Day 1

- ① Read Genesis 15. God and Abram talk a lot with each other in this chapter. What is one thing that God says that stick out to you?

- ② Read Genesis 15:1–4. What message is God communicating to Abram? Why did Abram need to hear this?

- ③ Read Genesis 15:5–6. What was Abram really believing in God to do? At that moment did Abram have any reason or evidence to trust God with these promises? Explain.

- ④ Abram was discovering that God’s promises continually demand faith from us to bridge the reality gap. But what are you to do when you feel you don’t have enough faith? What are you to do when you fear that your grasp on God’s promises is slipping?

- ⑤ Abram had prospered materially, as we’ve seen in previous chapters. But Abram was not content with the good life. He hungered to see God’s promises fulfilled. What are your goals for the next year? Are you content with where you are at? Are you satisfied with material gain? Or are you hungry for righteousness? What promises of God do you want to see fulfilled? Explain.

Day 2

- ① Read Genesis 15. What is Abram's demeanor with God given this reality gap where Abram lived, namely that God had promised things to Abram but they weren't realized yet?

- ② Compare Genesis 15:4–5 with Jeremiah 32:17.

- ③ Read Genesis 15:7–16. What does Abram ask of God and what happens? What is the purpose of the sacrifices being cut in two and laid out?

- ④ Read Genesis 15:17–21. The ceremony of the covenant is drawing to a close. The animals being cut in two and laid out is for a custom that typically had each party in the covenant walk between the cut animals to show what would happen if one of the parties broke the curse. Describe the significance that only God walks between the torn animals.

- ⑤ Read Genesis 15:17–21. By what figure could God have demonstrated his commitment to Abram more graphically, more vividly? He shows a more graphic commitment to us in the New Testament. Study 2 Corinthians 5:21.

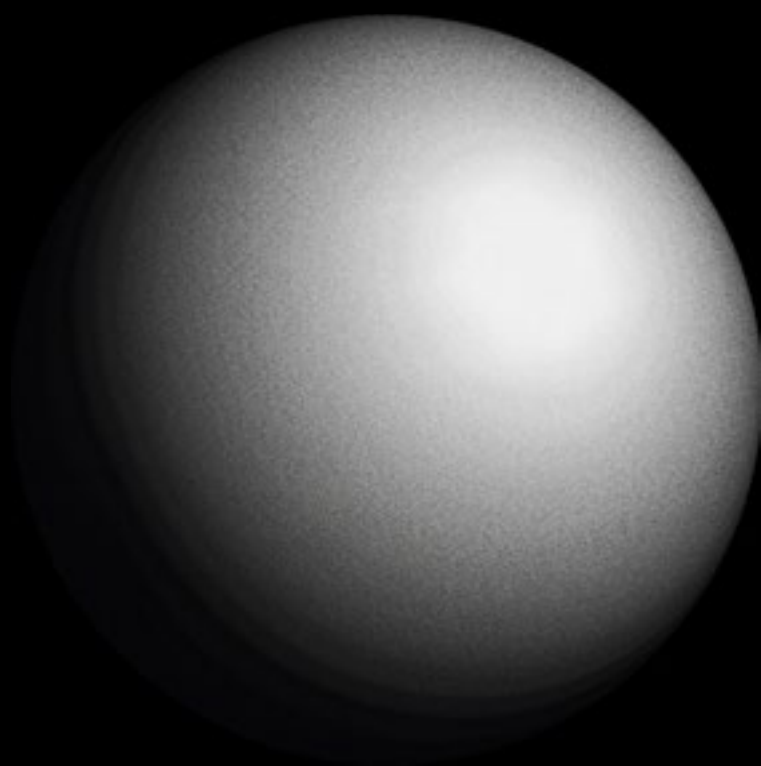
Day 3

- ① Write out and study Genesis 15:6. Faith does not look at itself at all. It looks entirely to God and finds in him a righteousness that is not our own, but is reckoned to us.

- ② Compare Genesis 15 with Galatians 3:1–14. How does Galatians 3:1–14 help us see more fully the truths laid out in Genesis 15? What do we learn about God’s plan, his ways of accomplishing his plans, and how do we fit in?

Sermon Notes

Week 6



84

Genesis 16

Shawn

Vradenburg

Timing is everything. Better said, trusting in God's timing is everything.

Today as we walk through our lives, there are very few purchases that have not been turned into a common convenience. If you need a ride, hail a Lyft or an Uber from the app (hopefully from your friendly Cities driver, Sam Choi). If you want to eat at your favorite restaurant, it probably has a home delivery service so you don't have to talk with a person. There are very few things that cannot be brought to our doors that we desire. In fact, I just saw that I can press a button and toilet paper is purchased using my card, packaged, shipped, and delivered to my house without any other action from me. If we want it, the time is now. Now, I am quick to say that these conveniences and companies having strong order fulfillment are not a bad thing, but I think it may be a picture of our hearts. We want what we want and we want it now. Insert obscure Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory reference here: Veruca Salt singing "I Want it Now!" and Mr. Wonka still denies her and she is proclaimed as a bad egg. This kind of "I want it now" is what I see when I look at Genesis 16.

When we enter the scene here in Genesis 16, we are coming off of some really amazing promises that God made to Abram in Genesis 15. God speaks to Abram in a vision and promises that he will have many offspring, like the number of stars in the night sky, even though he and his wife Sarai have not been able to have children at this point (Gen. 15:5). God also promises that Abram will inherit a large portion of land and God is the one who holds himself to this oath or promise

with Abram (Gen 15:17-21). So with this as our immediate context, now we enter into this new scene of Genesis 16. Sarai has still not been able to have any children. So, she steps in and says that something needs to be done because: "the Lord has prevented me from bearing children." So she makes a questionable recommendation to Abram that he should take her servant Hagar and sleep with her to have children. Now, what happens next reminds me a lot of our first Father and Mother in the garden. Abram listens to his wife, does not protect his marriage, and takes Hagar as another wife. We have a glimpse here of what occurred in Eden once again. Abram has an opportunity to trust God and speak truth into a situation, and say something like: "No. The Lord has just promised us these offspring, along with blessing upon blessing, let's trust him." In both scenarios the men fail to protect their wives and offspring through passivity. Rewind. Adam is in the garden, with a world of blessing and a world of "yes" around him. I imagine the earth maybe still ringing with the creating and world-breathing voice of God. Almost like Narnia in *The Magician's Nephew*. The world still is ringing and ground still rumbling with the song of Aslan. We see the glory of his "yes" in part in Genesis 2 which says, "And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food," and "Surely you may eat of every tree, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat." Adam is passive and lets his wife take and takes himself. Abram is passive and lets his wife "take" and takes himself, a lot like Adam.

Now, in Abram's taking of Hagar as a wife, it appears for a short half of a verse that they were successful: "she conceived." Success, taken! Oh wait, the result takes a quick turn. Now there is animosity and contempt between Hagar and Sarai that most likely was not there before. I am sure that this is surprising to almost no one. I cannot even imagine what it would feel like if you were Sarai and Hagar in this scenario. If you are Sarai, you have been pining after children for so long, and seemingly right away, your husband's new wife, Hagar, conceives. I would be hurt even if it was my idea. Now for Hagar, she was taken not willingly and joyfully, but told: "Your job is to have a child and share the status of wife, but you will be the lower wife." I think that would be a challenge to say the least. Now if we take a step back, does it seem as though this is the way that it is supposed to be? Is this the joyful blessing and fruitful outcome that God promised and Sarai and Abram were looking for? No, not really.

Sarai and Abram got what they wanted, a child, but the fruit of not trusting in God's timing was pain and sin. Can any of you see this in your life? I can. I think of my relationship with my wife, Ashley. We had a challenging and interesting engagement because I was getting ready to leave for Afghanistan. During that time we started to believe lies of "You are already committed to one another" and through my poor leadership we started pushing and driving past physical boundaries that we had established. I/ We took, even though God has given us a place for physical intimacy in covenant marriage that was approach-

ing within the 18 months. I did not trust God's timing, I wanted it now. Guess what the result was: pain and sin. It was not as sweet as what we thought going in and it was not the joy that was intended for us.

Now let's look back at our text in Genesis 16. This sin and taking charge of the situation on the part of Sarai and Abram, and not trusting God's timing, has resulted in a twist on the original plan. Interestingly, God still moves forward with a promise, but not the same one we hear one chapter before. This time the promise comes to Hagar after she has run away as a result of Sarai's harshness. God tells Hagar through a messenger in v. 10-12 that God will multiply her offspring, and that he will dwell over all his kinsmen. So, similar to the promise to Abram, Hagar through Ismael will have a large number of descendants and they will not be servants like Hagar is. Now that seems nice, but in the same verse of promise (Gen 16:12) we see that "He will be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him." So mixed into the promise of multiplication is a violent and hostile growth of a people. I think that makes it safe to say that this was not the covenant-fulfilling child. (More to come next chapter on this one). We will see soon, that the Lord makes good on His promises and upholds the covenant despite the sin of Abram and Sarai.

This demonstrates to us our fleshly efforts cannot cause or thwart the promises of God. He is the ultimate covenant keeper for us even today. So many times in life we have said, "This is what I need and I need it now, this 'cistern' will really satisfy

me," rather than trusting in the Lord, the fountain of living water and his timing (Jer. 2:12-13). Lord help us to not take, but trust in you no matter the circumstances because you have demonstrated that you are for us. You are so for us and love us that you sent Christ for us even though we take and do not trust. Praise you the merciful, covenant-keeping King!

Day 1

- ① Read Genesis 16. In your opinion, what were the motives of Abram and Sarai in using Hagar? Do you think the move is right and done out of faith or wrong and done out of impatience? Explain. Review Genesis 15:1–4.

- ② Read Genesis 16:1–6. Describe Abram’s interactions with Sarai in these verses. What happens to the relationship between Sarai and Hagar? See 1 Samuel 1:1–8.

- ③ Read Genesis 16:1–6. Note that the author refers to Hagar as “the Egyptian.” This could be a literary pointer to unbelief due to the reference to Egypt. In what ways could this whole episode be seen as unbelief on the part of Abram and Hagar? See also Deuteronomy 17:17 and Genesis 2:24.

- ④ In Genesis 13–15 we have seen Abram the hero of the faith in the various roles of prophet, priest, and king. Now we see Abram waver. Read and study 1 Corinthians 10:12. How can this be applied to your life right now?

- ⑤ Read Genesis 16:2. Can temptations to sin come to us from the ones that are closest to us? See Genesis 3:6, 2 Corinthians 11:14, and Matthew 16:23. What interactions take place in your home or at work that from those closest to you that “cause” you to sin? How can you proactively fight against this and take ownership of your own sin?

Day 2

- ① Read Genesis 16. This records when Hagar flees to Shur. Describe God's intervention in this chapter. Where does he come in and what does he do?

- ② Read Genesis 16:7–12. Who is this "angel of the Lord?" Consult a Study Bible for the different interpretations.

- ③ Read Genesis 16:7–12. Describe the attitude shift that God is asking Hagar to do. What do you think about this? How is this possible (see Genesis 16:13)?

- ④ Read Genesis 16:11. Ishmael means "God hears." Describe the significance of this given the current situation. Do you feel that God hears you in your pain and looks after you? Explain. See Exodus 3:7.

- ⑤ How does Genesis 16:13 relate to John 4:1–38? What is God's aim in meeting you in your pain and hearing you and taking care of you?

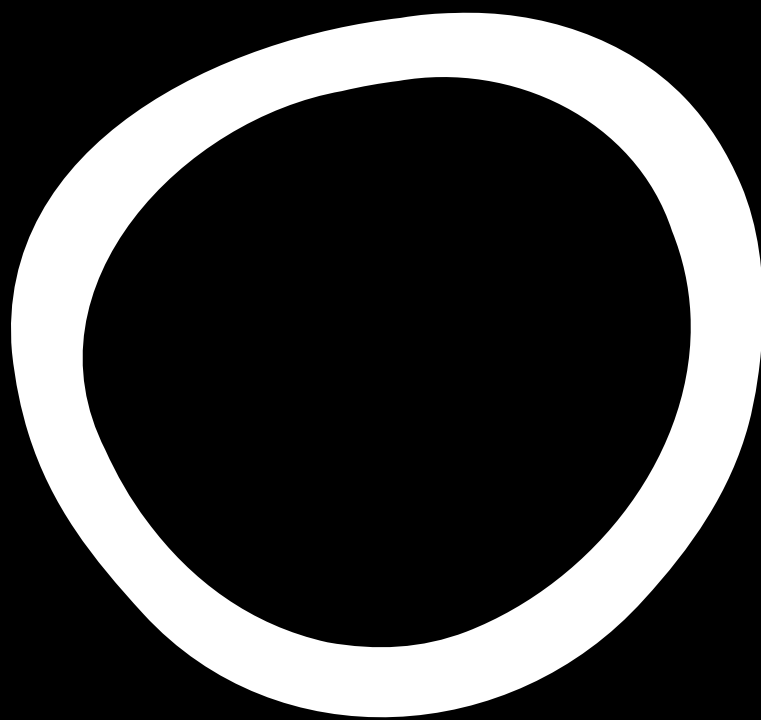
Day 3

① Read and study Galatians 4:21–31.

② Study Galatians 5:1.

Sermon Notes

Week 7



94

Genesis 17

Haakon
Hansen

The farther along I get in my life, the more and more encouragement I find in the book of Genesis. We all know Genesis as the all important first book of the Bible. And, as in any story, the beginning chapters (or books) are crucial, not only to grab the reader's attention, but also to lay the foundations upon which the story will be built and ultimately completed. The early characters play a key role in giving us a glimpse into what the story is about and where it may be going. But more importantly, early on we get a glimpse into the Author's mind, and what He is trying to communicate through His characters.

Genesis 17 is a well known chapter where God establishes a covenant with Abram. God promises to make Abram exceedingly fruitful, the father of a multitude of nations from which kings will come. Additionally, God promises to give the land of Canaan to Abram and his offspring, and to be their God, both to Abram and his offspring throughout their generations. And to bring this promise home, God gives Abram a new name—Abraham—which means “father of a multitude.” This of course would have sounded great to Abraham, but he had one problem. He was 99 years old, his wife not much younger, and they continued childless. How would Abram truly become Abraham, the father of a multitude, with no son? God goes on to promise the impractical. Sarah would conceive and have a son, and he was to be named Isaac. Abraham was to name his son Isaac, which means “he laughs,” because that is what Abraham did in the presence of God at the thought of him and

Sarah bearing a son in their old age: he laughed.

Anyone who reads this chapter can agree on two things. First, the “what” of this promise was incredible. Vast amounts of land, a lineage of kings, generations of fruitful offspring, and more particularly the son that Abraham and Sarah always wanted. Second, the “how” of this promise was pragmatically ridiculous. Even today with all of our medical and scientific advances, the thought, let alone a promise, of a 90-year-old woman not just conceiving but bearing a healthy full-term baby with her 99-year-old husband is hard to fathom. But as this story, and the rest of the Bible, goes on to prove to us—“with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). However, what is most fascinating to me in this chapter is not the “what” or even the “how,” but the “who.”

If we step back a chapter, what do we see out of the recipients of these amazing promises of God? We see a bitter and faithless wife and a weak and lustful husband. In the chapter leading up to these gracious promises we find Sarai, giving in to unbelief and holding bitterness towards God for not allowing her to have children. In her pride, she encourages and consents with her husband to have an affair with her servant Hagar for the sake of using her for a child. And what did Abram have to say about all of this? Nothing. When he should have been strong, and reminded his wife of the promises God had already made to them, he weakly gave in to her demand and his own comfort and lusts along the way. After Hagar conceives, as was Sarai's intention, Sarai

goes on to be so harsh to Hagar that she flees her, only to return after an angel of the Lord appears to her and comforts her.

This is the context and family dynamic of God's promises in Genesis 17. And in the marrying of that context and those promises, we have much to be encouraged about. It is unfortunately true that so many of us come from such similar family dynamics and brokenness. And even if that isn't the case, we are personally not strangers to the immense character flaws displayed by Sarai and Abram in Genesis 16. But God, the Author, through His relationship to these characters shows us what He wants to communicate to us. Our merciful God comes to people in their mess, in their sin and foolishness, and He redeems them. He does not go around looking for flawless, squeaky clean individuals deserving of His promises. He takes the wayward and helpless character, the weak and broken character, and by His grace He makes them new. He finds Abram's and Sarai's and turns them into Abraham's and Sarah's. Abram could never have become Abraham, the father of a multitude, without God's transformative grace coming into his life.

As I said earlier, the beginning chapters of the Bible lay its foundation and show us where the story is headed. Is this redeeming grace not what we see throughout the rest of the Bible? Story after story of messed up individuals, families, and relationships being sought out by God to redeem them and make them new. Isn't it so fitting that Jesus, the exact imprint of God's nature (Heb. 1:30), would tell us that he “came not to

call the righteous but sinners” (Mark 2:17)? Are we not all, every one of us, sinners through and through? But behold, the God of Abraham, behold the Cross. God takes our mess on Himself, that we may be cleaned. He takes our fruitlessness to make us fruitful. He finds us as children of wrath, and by His own blood and effort, makes us into children of God. What a God, what an Author, what a Redeemer. Behold the God of Abraham, behold the Cross.

Day 1

- ① Read Genesis 17. What major events/themes are introduced and what do we learn about them?

- ② Read Genesis 17:1–3. What does God say of himself in 17:1 and what does it mean? In what ways is this important in the context of the rest of Genesis 17 and into 18? Compare 17:1 with Matthew 28:18–19.

- ③ What is God’s role in the covenant (17:4–8); Abraham’s role (17:9–14); and Sarah’s role (17:15–16)?

- ④ Compare the covenant of Genesis 15 with the covenant of 17:1–16. What distinguishes the two from each other?

- ⑤ Read Genesis 17:4–5. Why did God give Abram a new name? What do the names of Abram and Abraham mean?

Day 2

- ① Read Genesis 17. How does the biblical understanding of God, as the covenant initiator and covenant keeper, go against popular views of God in our society?

- ② Read Genesis 17:15–21. Describe the interaction. What promises does God make? What distinctions are made between those who receive blessings from the covenant and those with whom the covenant is established?

- ③ Read Genesis 17:22–27 and read Romans 4. What do you make of Abraham’s response in these verses?

- ④ Read Genesis 18:1–10. Note the interchange of “Lord” and “three men.” See also Genesis 1:26 (God, singular, yet “us” plural). What do you make of this? What takes place at the oaks of Mamre?

- ⑤ Read Genesis 18:9–21. Study Genesis 18:14. What do we learn about God? How did Sarah respond to the renewal of the promise? Why?

Day 3

- ① Read Romans 4 again. Study Colossians 2:11–14. What was the deeper purpose and meaning of circumcision in Genesis 17?
- ② God displayed ownership of Abraham's life by changing his name and requiring circumcision. How does he display ownership of your life?

Sermon Notes

106 Abraham—God's Friend
Linda Linder

114 Story
Joanna Polley

Week 8

Abraham—
God's Friend

Linda Linder



105

Abraham was God's friend. How do we know this? The Bible tells us so.

In 2 Chronicles 20:7 Jehoshaphat prays, "Did you not, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend?"

The prophet Isaiah records God calling Abraham his friend in Isaiah 41:8. "But you Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend."

And James, speaking of Abraham in James 2:23, states, "and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'—and he was called a friend of God."

I want to be God's friend, don't you? What does the life of God's friend look like? Again, the Bible tells us.

TWIN TENETS OF FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD

The Bible reveals a good deal about God's friend, Abraham. The biblical account of his story is one of a lifetime of faith in God and obedience to God's leading. In fact, when we study Abraham's life story we discover that these two elements, faith and obedience, are foundational tenets in the life of God's friend. The author of Hebrews sums it up well when he says, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8). Yes, the Bible tells us that Abraham consistently, not perfectly, but consistently lived out his life demonstrating the twin tenets of friendship with God,

faith and obedience. He believed with faith and obeyed God time and time again without question or hesitation.

GOD'S FRIEND CONVERSES WITH GOD

Added to the twin tenets of friendship with God (faith and obedience) other elements of friendship come to light as we zoom in to particular events in Abraham's life. For example, in Genesis 18 and 19 it becomes quite evident that Abraham had a lifetime of conversing with God. God and Abraham were not strangers. They had ongoing discussions. They talked to each other. And when the LORD showed up in person in front of Abraham's tent with two other men (Genesis 18:1–21) Abraham was so happy to see them that he ran to meet them and bowed before them, asked Sarah to quickly make dinner for them, and personally dashed to get the meat to roast. He stood by them as they ate and conversed with the three visitors over dinner. What a beautiful relationship Abraham had with God! A friend, indeed.

GOD'S FRIEND CARES FOR FAMILY

Another series of events illustrates how friendship with God overflows into earthly relationships. Abraham had good relationships with his family. He loved and respected his father, Terah, so much that he took his own wife and other family members, left what was no doubt the good life in the major city of Ur, and followed Terah to the smaller city of Haran. Later when both his father and his brother died in Haran and God called him to take the much greater step of mov-

ing out into the unknown, Abraham graciously took his nephew Lot, his dead brother's son, with him. Abraham, in fact, had an ongoing generous and kind relationship with Lot. He was supportive of Lot's growing success and wealth. And when the need came to separate Lot's wealth from his own, Abraham trusted God and was open-handed in letting Lot pick where he wanted to settle. Later when Lot was taken captive by enemy armies Abraham, although not a fighting man, led trained men in pursuit and rescued Lot, his possessions and his family.

GOD'S FRIEND INTERCEDES FOR OTHERS

Genesis 18:22–19:38 gives us a particular peek into the life of God's friend. Knowing the sweeping view of Abraham's story we understand that the events recorded in this passage are not out of character for this man. The events recorded here are very much in rhythm with the drumbeat of Abraham's overall life—a life of faith in God and obedience to his Word. A life in relationship with God and with his earthly family. This is simply one more illustration of what the life of God's friend is like.

When we pick up the narrative in Genesis 18:22, the LORD and the two men with him have just finished their meal and are continuing their conversation with Abraham. The LORD tells his friend that he is going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and then sends the two men who were with him to Sodom to check things out. The two men leave, but the LORD stays back and stands with Abraham looking over the valley toward Sodom. God

and Abraham continue their after dinner conversation. It is an intimate conversation, an exchange between friends. Abraham is not afraid to press the hard question about justice with the LORD. It seems as if Abraham is wrestling with whether or not a just God would let the righteous be destroyed along with the unrighteous. And God, knowing his friend's heart, answers graciously. Abraham doesn't say it out loud, but there is no doubt he is worried about his nephew. This conversation Abraham has with the LORD is really the first recorded intercessory prayer in Scripture. Abraham is, imperfectly perhaps, but persistently interceding for his family member Lot.

The next day, "Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD." And now in the morning light as he looked down on Sodom he saw nothing but smoke. God did what he said he was going to do. He always does! He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. But not without mercy. "God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow" (Genesis 19:27-29)

In the end, of course, it didn't turn out well for Lot. Lot was responsible for his own life decisions. But because of Abraham's heart concern and prayer, God did show him mercy. As a friend of God, Abraham prayed, God acted, and the results are left in God's hands. We have no idea the influence our prayers have!

ABRAHAM WAS GOD'S FRIEND. ARE YOU?

Abraham was God's friend. The life of God's friend is a life built on faith

and obedience. It is a life that overflows into intimate communication with God, caring about others, and intercessory prayer. It is not a perfect life lived by a perfect person, but it is a life filled with the presence of God. Abraham was God's friend. Are you?

God wants you to be his friend. He sent his Son Jesus for you. Will you believe in him? Will you obey him? Will you be his friend?

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another." (John 15:12-7)

Day 1

- ① Read Genesis 18:20–33. What does Abraham think will happen to Sodom? What does Abraham do about it and why does he?

- ② Read Genesis 18:20–21. What do we learn about Sodom? See Genesis 13:13.

- ③ Read Genesis 18:23–25. What argument does Abraham use to appeal to God? Is God's character good news or bad news? Compare Abraham's intercession to Moses' in Psalm 106:21–23 and Jesus' in Hebrews 7:23–25.

- ④ Read Genesis 18:27. How does Abraham describe himself?

- ⑤ Read Genesis 18:26–33. What principle is established? Compare with Matthew 13:24–30.

Day 2

- ① Read Genesis 19. Summarize the key points of what happens? What are your initial impressions of the events?

- ② Read Genesis 19:1–3. What do we learn about Lot through his being in the gate of the city and the hospitality he shows? Compare with Abraham’s hospitality with the men in 18:1–8. What message do the men bring to Abraham and what message do they bring Lot?

- ③ Read Genesis 19:4–11. Lot tries to maintain his virtue as a host only to shame himself as a father. What do we learn about these traveling visitors?

- ④ Read Genesis 19:12–26. Did Lot and his family quickly obey the angels? Describe their reaction. How did God intervene?

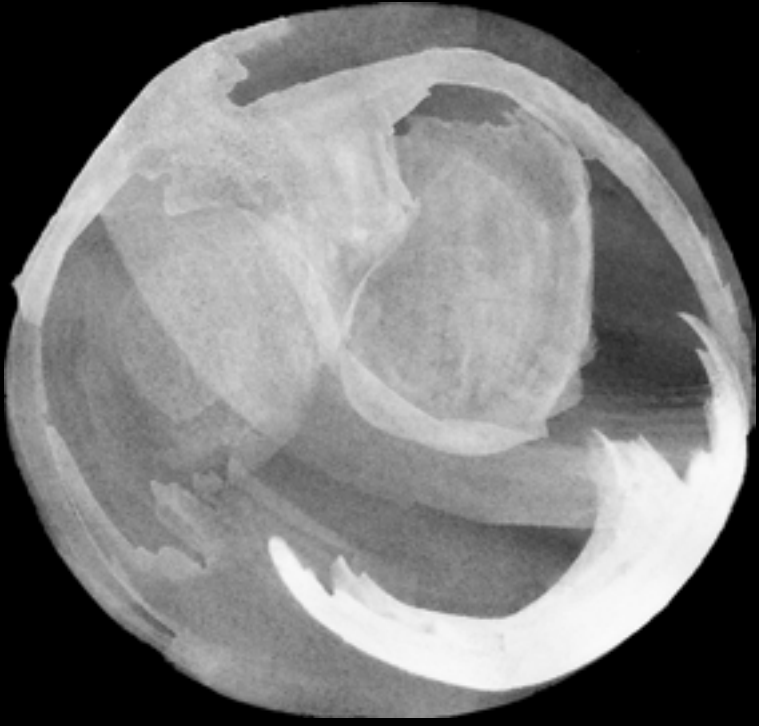
- ⑤ Read Genesis 19:27–38. What do you think Abraham was thinking when he saw the smoke? Compare the acts of Lot’s daughters with the sons of Noah in Genesis 9:18–29.

Day 3

- ① At first pass it appears that Abraham is most concerned about Lot being taken in the destruction of Sodom. But what if Abraham also had in mind the salvation of unbelievers in Sodom? Then having at least 10 people in Sodom could be all that is needed to impact the city. Read and study Acts 18:9–10. How do these stories impact your vision for your neighborhood?
- ② Study 2 Peter 2:4–10. Review your notes on 2 Peter 2:4–10 from week 3. After studying Genesis 18–19 this week, what new things can you glean from the 2 Peter passage? How does the 2 Peter passage help shed light on Genesis 19?

Sermon Notes

FOR THE
SUN



I grew up in a Christian home in North Minneapolis. I'm the second of six children, all homeschooled. My parents love the world, love other cultures, love languages. Because of the love for other cultures my parents, when I was 11, decided to try missions for seven months in southern France. This was an amazing experience and I'm so thankful for this exposure when I was so young because I now have a heart for other cultures and the deeply lost of this world.

Before we moved, my parents had purchased a home in Corcoran, MN. My dad had promised us that we would get

horses and animals, that we were going to have a little hobby farm. However, when we moved back from France my dad, who had quit his job, couldn't get another one. He had been successful at trading stocks before we left and had made close to \$1 million. But our stock broker lost it all shortly after we moved home. We couldn't get horses and have a hobby farm, which for my little 11-year-old heart was hard to understand. I could only understand that my dad hadn't kept his word, and I think Satan and sin used this to implant the lie that God is the same. He doesn't keep

his word, and he only gives you things to take them away, to tease me.

My dad took the loss of the money hard, and this combined with continued unemployment caused to him to begin dealing with very severe depression for several years. I would see my dad every day, but he wasn't emotionally present, he just seemed like an empty shell of himself. This led me to believe God was distant, God didn't care about us. We were a "good Christian family," so why didn't God provide? Why did we have to rely on state help and food shelves to live? I was 12 when all this started happening and it

lasted for years with lots of unanswered questions, and things only seemed to get worse.

Throughout all this I began to develop anxiety through high school. At the time I wouldn't have said I was anxious, I would have said I'm just a hard worker. But this was all driven by fear of God, and not the reverent fear that is explained in the Bible. It was a 'terrified God would smite me' kind of fear. I overachieved at everything. I got a job when I was 14 because it felt safer to rely on myself, rather than God or my parents and because I needed to help buy food. I took college

classes full time my junior and senior year of high school (PSEO) so that I could graduate college sooner and get out into the real world and away from everything at home. I'm sure that if I had talked about what was going on in my heart to my parents they would have sought help immediately. But through sin and Satan's lies, it felt safer to not rock the boat at home.

But I couldn't get away from home. The college that I applied to in Virginia, my dream school, didn't offer me enough financial aid to attend, which meant I had to take a year off to work in hopes of someday being able to go. But I could

do that, I could work hard. I worked two jobs, one at a coffee shop and one as a waitress. The serving world comes with a whole slew of temptations and it's deeply entrenched in the world. But the big ones are drinking and sleeping around. I would go with coworkers to house parties and drink until I couldn't remember my name, and more important to me, what was happening at home. By God's immeasurable grace, nothing ever happened to me while I was drunk. But even with the drinking, I still felt empty. I knew I was just running away from the problems at home. My parents were being threatened with foreclo-

sure on their house, my dad was still deep in the midst of depression, and I didn't want to face any of it. I just wanted out. And it wasn't happening, because I hadn't made enough to get away to Virginia.

My parents ended up losing their house and filing for bankruptcy a year after I graduated high school; it further pushed me away from the Lord. This was our dream house. Why would the Lord take it away? Why was he taking away from us and not providing? I was so confused and even more mad at God because nothing seemed to be going the way I wanted.

My sophomore year I chose to go to community college to finish getting an associate's degree. And on a whim I applied to go to the University of Minnesota my junior year. It seemed like Virginia was never going to happen so I decided something else needed to, and I'm so glad the Lord led me to the U. The day I moved into a random apartment with random girls a few days before school started, I received a call from a friend of a friend of a friend, who asked if I wanted to get involved in a campus ministry, Campus Outreach. I was so desperate for relationships and community that I met this random girl and she

introduced me to a community of Christians that were different than I had ever known. They talked about sin like it meant something. They loved Jesus with everything they had and really wanted others to know grace. It was so real. It drew me in, but my anger at God was still very real. My whole junior year I played tug-of-war in my heart between wanting this Jesus, but wanting my lifestyle.

My senior year I was asked to live in the Campus Outreach girls house. I was so excited! I think I was still convinced that I was a believer. I knew all the right answers and could spout verses from

long-term memory because of my church background. But it wasn't real. About a week before I was supposed to move into the house, I went to a coworker's bachelorette party. We bar hopped like crazy and I don't remember much of that night. The Lord again protected me from harm. But the next morning I woke up so guilty. I was supposed to move into this Christian house and here I was not able to remember what happened the night before. So out of fear, I didn't tell anyone.

That fall I was discipled by a staff person, Lisa Reagan, and it was through Lisa that I was led to a real relationship

with Jesus. Before becoming a Christian, I was harsh, I liked to call it blunt at the time, but really I could just be mean. And Lisa would take it and call me on it. It was exactly what I needed. About six weeks into the semester I was meeting with Lisa and I came into our meeting furious with a roommate. I told her what had happened and she listened patiently as I ranted about how horrible I thought this girl was. After I finished venting the first question she asked me was, "So where is your sin?" I was thinking, "Are you serious?" In my mind it was all about this girl. Lisa continued to push and told me that I

needed to forgive this girl and repent of my anger. I pushed back, "But how often? How often do I forgive her?" O how much I am like the Apostle Peter! Lisa asked me, "How often do you mess up every day and Jesus looks on you with love and says, 'I forgive you.'" I will never forget that moment. The Lord used Lisa to soften my heart and open it to his grace.

Over the next few months, I ate up Scripture like I never had before. The Lord began showing me parts of his purpose in all the hardship of my family. He showed me that running away wasn't the answer but running toward him is best. I loved

showing this grace and love to younger students. I desired to come on staff with Campus Outreach.

I would love to say that I never struggled with anxiety, terror of God, or doubting that He would provide ever again. That's not always how sin and sanctification work. During engagement and the first two years of being married to my husband, all this sin came crashing down on me heavier than before. It affected our marriage so intensely, we went to counseling for two years. The Lord started to redeem and sanctify me through this, but every time a new situation comes up,

all my sin rears its ugly head again and the Lord and I have to go to work. Most recently it's been in being pregnant with our first child due in December. I have never felt so out of control. There is nothing I can do to guarantee this baby's life. Where I'm at in the pregnancy I have such little chance of losing the baby, but that small chance still haunts me. I have to do battle daily on my doubts that God is good, sometimes it's minute by minute.

But what helps me is looking back on the ways God has redeemed, provided for, and loved me, often in ways I didn't expect. The Lord used my dad's depres-

sion to help him fight the hurt he received from his own father. Because of this, my dad is now the sweetest dad and grandpa. He fights to provide but with a sense of freedom and not desperation. My parents' marriage is sweeter and more loving because of the darkness they walked through. By walking through counseling I can now tell of my sin and pain with freedom and not shame and guilt and the Lord has used this to relate to more women and draw them to freedom. My marriage is sweeter, deeper, and richer because of walking through deep valleys of our own pain together than it would have been had

we just decided to coast and coexist. How much more glory the Lord gets by planning things this way, it's amazing.

These are what I remind myself when the fears come creeping in, that God truly does "work all things out for those who love him and are called according to his good purpose." Even deep pain, shame, fear, and anxiety he works for good and for his glory.

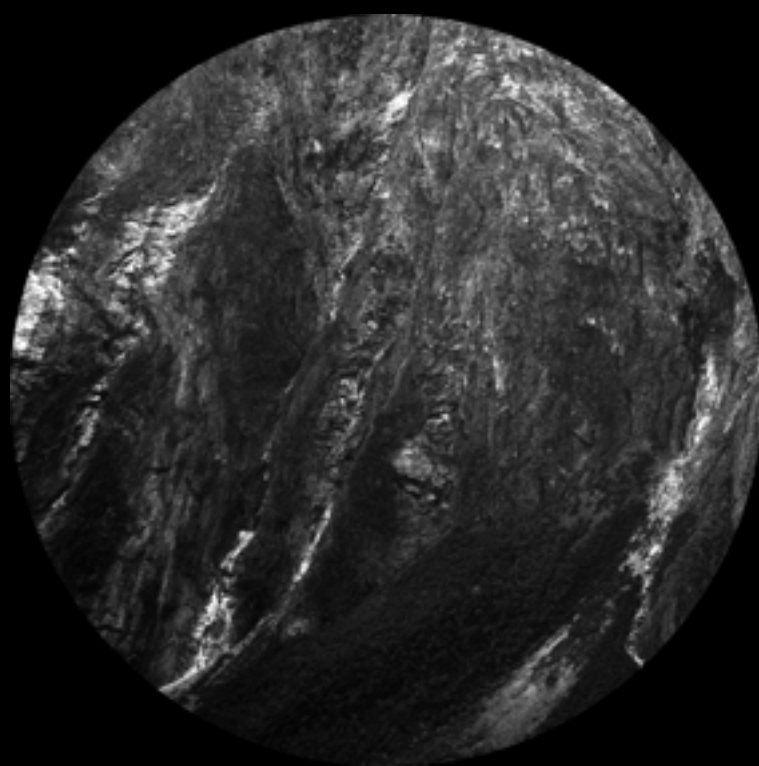
Week 9

ALL THE PROMISES OF GOD

FIND
THEIR YES
IN HIM.

The
Reformation:
Trick or Treat

David Mathis



135

It's no accident that October 31 is both Halloween and the day remembered for the start of the Reformation. Both key off November 1, All Saints' Day—or All Hallows' Day (Hallows from the Old English for saints or holy ones).

On All Hallows' Eve, October 31, 1517, the Roman Church received the world's most memorable trick-or-treater at its door—though barely noticed at the time—when a lowly priest named Martin Luther approached the threshold of the Wittenberg branch in Germany and posted his 95 measly theses (they aren't nearly as impressive as you would expect). The coming All Saints' Day seemed like an excuse for sparring about the Church's deplorable sanctioning of indulgences, and Luther was angling for some good-spirited debate.

THE SPARK THAT SET THE CHURCH ABLAZE

But the Church was centuries overdue for major reform, the kindling was in place, and Luther's little, almost accidental spark set the whole thing ablaze. Some nameless visionary translated his theses from the Church's Latin into the people's German and sent them far and wide through the printing press. In time, this lowly monk proved to have what it took to hold his ground against the Church and the world—"Here I stand," he said courageously before the emperor—and under God, he became the human tip of the spear for massive reform.

Of course, that's the reductionistic version of the story. Save his own Son, God doesn't change the world through a single person, but through people. With and behind every re-

membered individual is some great collective. Luther had a significant supporting cast in his Wittenberg work, and on the grander scale, it took many others—like Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, Martin Bucer, Thomas Cranmer, John Knox, and many more, all with their associates and assistants—to usher in reform far and wide. God gave Luther the bullhead to do the pioneering. He was the battering ram. But five centuries of Protestant Christianity wouldn't have followed in the wake of Luther alone.

ENTER THE FRENCH HUMANIST

In particular, Calvin's thinking, writing, and systematizing played a complementary role to Luther's pioneering flair. Born in 1509 in France, Calvin was only eight years old when Luther played his Halloween trick in 1517.

Calvin was trained as a humanist and converted sometime between 1528 and 1532, while at university, and by All Saints' Day, 1533, he had himself in hot water. Sixteen years after Luther posted his theses, Calvin's friend Nicolas Cop delivered an All Saints' convocation heralding Christ as the sole mediator (not the "saints"). Some suspected this patently Protestant address was written by Calvin, and he soon found himself on the run.

As an exile, Calvin spent time in Basel, and seemingly by accident came to Geneva for a single night in 1536 on his way to Strasbourg for an ivory-tower, academic life of study and writing. The fiery Swiss reformer William Farel learned Calvin was in town and prevailed upon him to join the reformation cause in Geneva.

Calvin acquiesced, and stayed there in Geneva—minus a three-year exile from 1538–1541—until his death in 1564 at age 54.

THE "ACCIDENTS" OF PROVIDENCE

Reformation Day is ripe for remembering an array of biblical truths—that the Scriptures are our only final authority (*sola Scriptura*); that God accepts us by grace alone, through faith alone, on the basis of Christ alone (justification); that God often uses the unlikeliest of people to turn the world upside down; that God doesn't just raise up great individuals, but collections of people, veritable teams, each with his lot, and his own local cohort, to bring about widespread change; and all these conspiring to the glory of God alone (*soli Deo gloria*).

But here's one to keep on your radar this year. God loves to use the seeming accidents in our lives to bring about his purposes. It's the "accidents" that remind us we're emphatically not the captain of our own soul, we're not piloting our own destinies, we're not on the point for planning the whole thing out and executing on it. How sad a course it would be if we cooked up the whole thing as we came of age and spent the rest of our lives living out our boring and uncreative little visions?

That such a Reformation began almost 500 years ago, and continues to this day—this is your story too—is not the result of any human plan. It has been the "accidents" which have given it the markings of divine fingerprints—Luther's accidental spark that first lit the flame and Calvin's accidental lone night in Geneva that changed

the course for that city and for a major branch of Protestant theology.

Reformation Day is a reminder to embrace the “accidents” in our lives, look for the hand of providence, and trust that his plans for us are better than our wildest dreams. For those who are his, he truly works together for their good all things—even and especially the seeming accidental—to do for us far more abundantly than all that we ask or think (Romans 8:28; Ephesians 3:20).

Day 1

- ① The NT makes references to characters from Genesis often. In this review week, the plan is to study some of those passages that contain references. "Study" means write down 3–5 observations, then interpret what the passage means, then prayerfully connect it to your life and jot down your application. Read Romans 1–4. Study Romans 4:1–8.

- ② Study Romans 4:9–12.

- ③ Study Romans 4:13–15.

- ④ Study Romans 4:16–22.

- ⑤ Study Romans 4:23–25.

Day 2

① Read Hebrews 11. Study Hebrews 11:8–12.

② Study Hebrews 11:13–16.

③ Study Hebrews 11:17–19.

④ Read Luke 17:20–37. Study Luke 17:32–33.

⑤ Read Galatians 3. Study Galatians 3:7–9.

Day 3

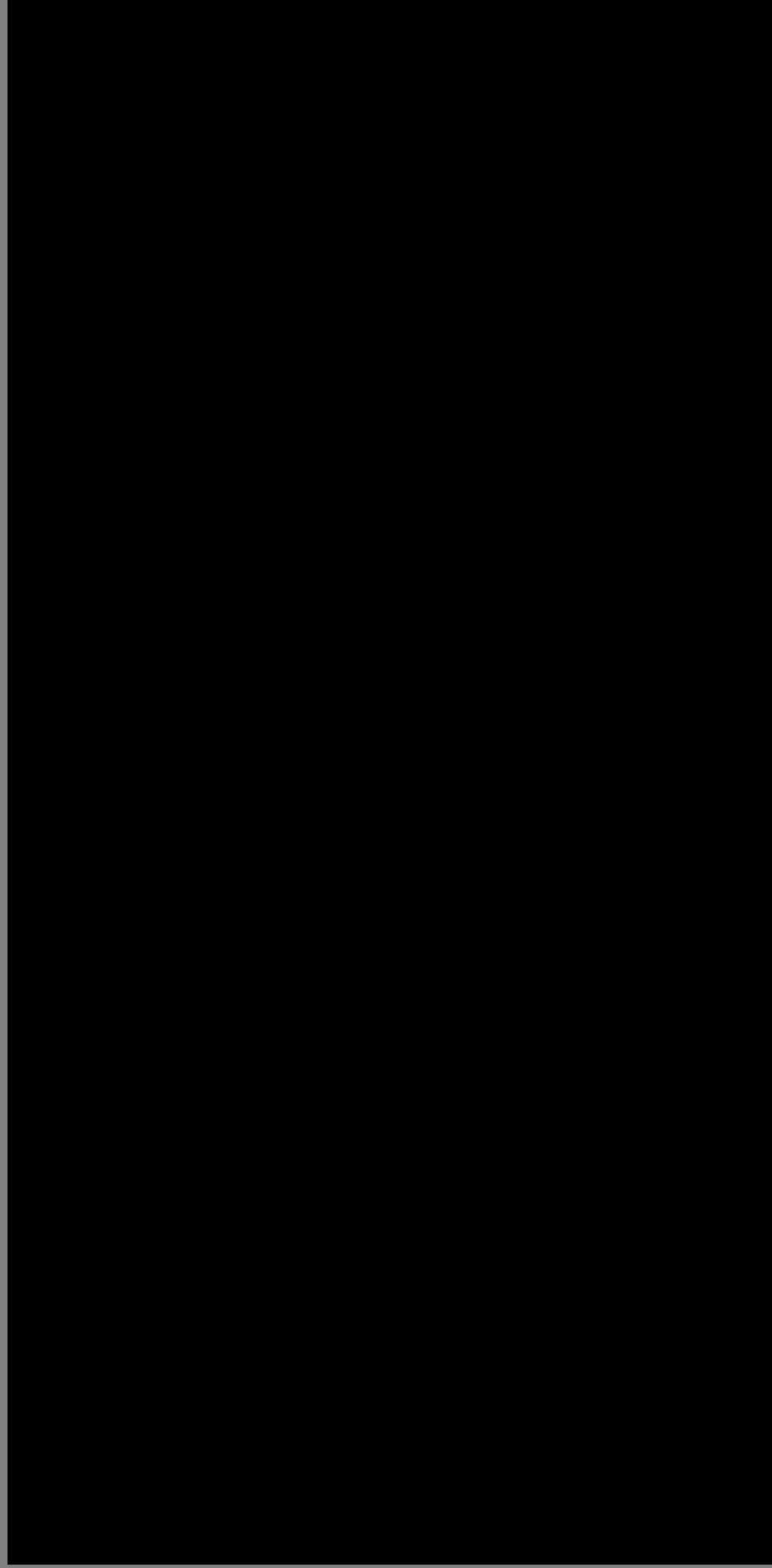
① Read Romans 5. Study Romans 5:1.

② Study Hebrews 11:39–40.

Sermon Notes

Week 10

Walking by Faith





The New Testament frequently refers to Abraham as an example of a man who walks by faith (Heb. 11:8–19). God refers to Himself as being “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Ex. 3:6), and Galatians 3:6 tells us that “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and that all who have faith are children of Abraham. While there are many examples of Abraham demonstrating his faith, Genesis 20 seems to give the opposite view. It tells us how, in an attempt to preserve his own life, Abraham tells the local authority, Abimelech, that his wife, Sarah, is his sister. This lie results in Abimelech taking Sarah to be his wife, and if not for the direct intervention of God, committing a great sin while Abraham looks on silently. Abimelech’s family suffers as a consequence of his indiscretion, suffering that is eased only when Abraham prays on their behalf, despite his direct role in the cause of their anguish. Looking more closely at Abraham’s actions, we see several disturbing things:

1. This is not the only time Abraham tells this lie. The first instance occurs in Genesis 12, where the consequences fall on Pharaoh and his household. Abraham then appears to be rewarded for his deceit, acquiring safety, sheep, cattle, donkeys, servants, and camels. This is also just after God promises that He will make him into a great nation, but Abraham justifies his lie by claiming that the Egyptians will kill him because his wife is beautiful. This shows a lack of faith in God to deliver on His promise. After all, how would he be made into a great nation if he is killed?

2. Abraham justifies his lie to Abimelech in two ways: he says to himself that there is no fear of God in the people and they will kill him to have his wife, and he tells Abimelech when confronted that it’s not really a lie, because she’s his half-sister. Not only does this demonstrate a lack of faith; it shows a lack of repentance and consideration of others, since he knew what his previous deceit had caused in Pharaoh’s army.

3. Abraham shows prejudice and makes assumptions about Abimelech and his people, but Abimelech shows more fear of God in this story than Abraham does, and sees more clearly Abraham’s wrong-doing (v. 9).

4. Abraham also leads his wife to sin, manipulating her by telling her that she shows her love to him by saying she is his sister, even though that puts her in a position to be morally compromised.

5. Abraham’s lie provides opportunity for Abimelech to sin unknowingly, and while God prevents him from sinning, it is clear that he would have suffered consequences had he not returned Sarah to Abraham.

6. There is never any mention of Abraham repenting of his sin. And again, he is rewarded in some way for his lies (Abimelech gives him livestock, slaves, and silver).

All of this seems to demonstrate a lack of faith on Abraham’s part, and yet chapter 21 begins with the words “Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for

Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him.”

The juxtaposition of Abraham’s actions with the fulfillment of God’s promise vividly demonstrates that God is faithful not because of our faithfulness, but because of who He is. Ultimately, it is not the amount of our faith, the consistency of our faith, or the unwavering nature of our faith that makes the difference. It is the object of our faith. Abraham acted in fear, and we often do the same. Every sin we commit demonstrates a lack of faith in God’s wisdom and goodness. But Christ, who is “the Author and Perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2),” promises that if we have faith the size of a mustard seed, nothing will be impossible for us (Matt. 17:20).

We might be tempted to look at Abraham as a hero, and certainly there are times when he sets a good example. But when we see him stumble, we can be encouraged by knowing that our failings do not hinder God’s plan. Isn’t it wonderful to know that God has always used, and continues to use, His flawed children to fulfill His perfect promises? Abraham’s story, full of inspiring acts of faith and sins birthed out of fear, serves as a reminder that ultimately there is only one Hero of the story, and while our faith in Him may waiver, His faithfulness to us never does.

Day 1

- ① Read Genesis 20. From “there”—where is Abraham traveling from (and what has he been up to in Genesis 18–19?) and where to? Does the text give a reason?

- ② Read Genesis 20:1–7. Is Abraham being wise and shrewd in this passage to protect the lineage and his he doing this out of faith? Or is this Abraham being a sinful man who is stumbling and making some bad decisions, and God rescues him? Explain.

- ③ Does Abraham display fear and act in deception and manipulation or does Abraham display faith in this chapter?

- ④ Compare Genesis 20 with Genesis 12. What is repeated by the author? What are similarities and what are differences? Note that the prohibition of adultery was not exclusive to later Israel, but was pervasive through the ancient Near East.

- ⑤ In what ways is Abraham a prophet? What do you think God (and the author) mean by this?

Day 2

- ① Read Genesis 20:8–13. Describe Abraham’s thought process for why he did what he did; how does Abraham justify his actions? Then compare that to how the Philistines actually responded to God. Does perception line up to reality for Abraham?

- ② Describe the disposition or concept of “fear of God” that shows up for the first time in Scripture in Genesis 20:11. Compare with Job 28:28, Proverbs 1:7, and Ecclesiastes 12:13. What does it look like in your life to “fear God”?

- ③ What is a “half-truth”? Is a “half-truth” a full lie? Explain. We do this way more than we’d like to think. Think about your day today. In your interactions at work or at home, what information did you give where you gave only some facts to help lead the person to think a certain way?

- ④ Are there cases where lying is acceptable in God’s eyes? Look at Exodus 1:15–22 as an example. Can you think of other examples in the Bible?

- ⑤ Read Genesis 20:14–18. Describe God’s grace towards Abraham in Genesis 20.

Day 3

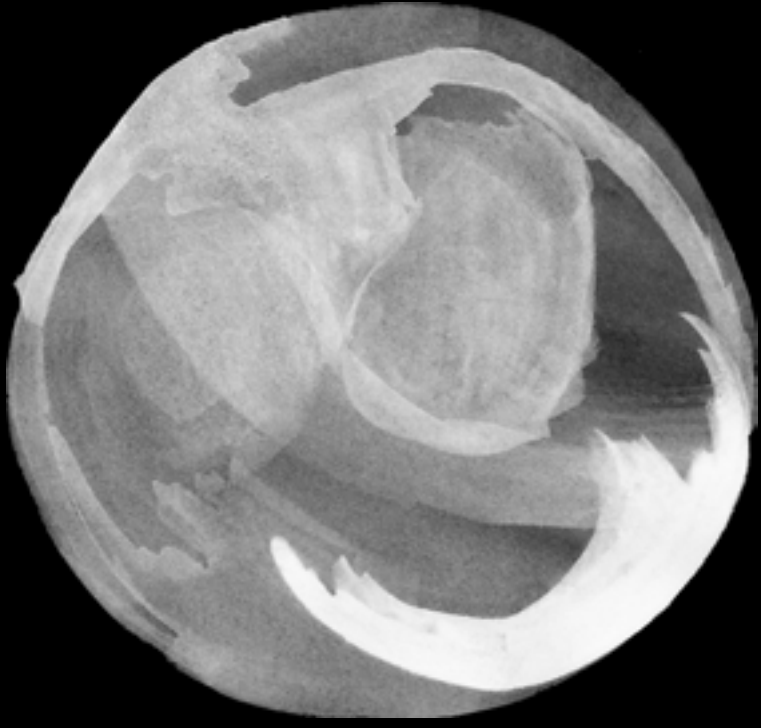
- ① God does not let our sin slide. There are consequences and ramifications of our sin. In the present story, it takes God's actions to prevent the typical serious ramifications that might result in such behavior. Imagine if God did not intervene and Abraham lost his wife to the king. Read and study Hebrews 12:1-2 to learn more of how we should deal with sin.
- ② Read and study Ephesians 4:25-29. Describe all the ways in which we can change from a "half-truth" lifestyle to a "full-truth" lifestyle. What are some things that have to happen to get there and what rewards exist for following Jesus down this path?

Sermon Notes

Week II

五
五
五
五
五

五
五
五
五
五



I used to think testimonies had to be extravagant and flashy. I questioned my salvation multiple times because I didn't have a big moment where the sky opened up and Jesus himself showed up in my room and audibly called me out of darkness. Although he can do things like that, he did not call me to himself that way. My love story with Jesus was slower and subtler and more unimpressive in human standards. It was more a wooing process over years than a "love at first sight" sort of experience.

I grew up in a Christian home in New Jersey going to church pretty much every

Sunday and Wednesday for youth group. Both my parents are believers. Jesus was a common household name. We said our prayers at bedtime and before meals. I got baptized when I was 7. Looking back, I remember wanting to make my parents and pastor happy, and I may have understood as much as a 7-year-old could about salvation, but all I remember is really really wanting to take communion (at the church we attended at the time they passed around a delicious looking huge loaf of bread and I wanted a piece!). So, I might have become a believer then. And I

did everything I could to live in a way that would convince any on-looker that I was.

Growing up, I was known as the “perfect” one. I got straight A’s and I was always on my best behavior. I was a little too shy to be the teacher’s pet but teachers always loved me. I worked my tail off in everything I did. I was terrified of disapproval from anyone—especially my parents and teachers. You probably would not have wanted to be my friend. Everything was secretly a competition because my worth was based upon trying to be the best or at the very least convincing you that I was perfect. It was exhausting,

but that is just how I learned to function and took that on as an identity. My peers did not love having a goody-two-shoes around all the time. I worked so hard for friendships but I inevitably felt left out. I thought this was how you are a good “Jesus freak”: show everyone how perfect life is with Jesus and then they would want to follow him too. From the outside I was the naive church girl that always had to be right. Under the thick layer of self-righteousness was an insecure little girl hungry for acceptance from any warm-blooded creature who would even

look my direction. Thank God Jesus did not leave me in this state.

Throughout middle school and the beginning of high school, when I thought I had nailed this “being a Christian” thing, Jesus was wearing down my “Kingdom of Rachel.” Through athletics and trials in friendships, the lack of boys romantically interested in me, and my failure to be the best at really anything—despite my best efforts—he never quite let my Kingdom stand. Then in 2007, I went to one of those huge Christian conferences for high-school students called LIFE. It was there, I think, that Jesus finally peeled back the

final layer of grime in my heart to show me himself. I don't really remember what song was playing or really what day it was but at some point it clicked that Jesus died for MY sins not just everyone else's. I knew deep down that I couldn't truly be perfect but now I was outed. I was bad enough at living perfectly that I needed a savior to come, live a perfect life, and die for the punishment I deserve. This was not all at one emotional moment or news I had never heard before. It was over the course of the conference that the Holy Spirit broke through. Towards the end of the week, I went to one of the

community computers in the conference center and made use of my brand new hot-mail account to email all of my friends. I was exploding in excitement and I had to tell them all that Jesus had done for me and how much he loved me. I could not keep it all in. That tends to be what happens when a human soul collides with Jesus! So looking back, I think that is when Jesus saved me.

My conversion was not flashy and the sky didn't open up but I am pretty sure that is when Jesus gave me eyes to see him as my love and savior not just a task-master to perform for, nor just my

parent's God. I keep saying "I think" because, at the time, I thought I was already saved. I never really questioned when I "became a believer" until college and someone asked me to share my testimony. Throughout college, the Lord used a ministry called Campus Outreach to mold and sharpen me through discipleship and gospel community in ways I never imagined. There I realized that every testimony is extraordinary—even seemingly boring ones like mine. Every testimony tells the glory of God speaking life into a soul that had no life and now I am forever alive. Since then, through many crazy hard chal-

lenges and amazingly beautiful blessings, God is giving me a constantly growing desire and love for his people, his Word, and evangelism. But my college and post-college crawl/walk/run with Jesus is a story for another time. I'd love to tell you about it! Wanna grab coffee sometime?

Day 1

- ① Read Genesis 21:1–7. What promises has God made to Abraham and Sarah thus far in the narrative? How have Abraham and Sarah responded to these promises? Describe the instances where God came and reassured them of the promises and the significance of these.

- ② Read Genesis 21:1. The Lord did as he said. The Lord did as he promised. What promises do you have from God from the Bible that you want to cling onto today? See Numbers 23:19 and Matthew 28:16–20.

- ③ Read Genesis 21:8–13. Describe the history between Sarah and Hagar. What do we learn in vv. 8–13 about the latest development in their relationship? What does Abraham think of all this and how does he get involved?

- ④ Read Genesis 21:14–21. What stands out to you most in this narrative? Describe the various pains that Hagar felt. She was “sent away.” She “wept.” Describe God’s reaction to the situation.

- ⑤ Describe various miraculous births in the OT, often to barren mothers (e.g. Jacob and Esau, Samson, Samuel, Moses, John the Baptist). With this background, read and study Matthew 1:18–25.

Day 2

- ① Read Genesis 21:22–34. What do we know about Abimelech (see Genesis 20, specifically 20:15)?

- ② Read Genesis 21:22–24. What is meant by, “God is with Abraham in everything he does” (see Genesis 39:1–6)? Why do you think Abimelech is specifically asking Abraham to not deal falsely with him?

- ③ Read Genesis 21:22–24. Abraham was a “sojourner” (to live as a foreigner) in the land. Though Abraham does not formally possess any of the land, he nonetheless has accumulated possessions, and is a permanent resident, so much that Abimelech wants to make a treaty with Abraham. What do you think Abimelech sees in Abraham that makes him want to make a treaty with him?

- ④ Read Genesis 21:24–34. Describe how the relationship kicks off.

- ⑤ Read Genesis 21:33. What does it mean that God is the “Everlasting God”? See Isaiah 40:28 and Psalm 90:2. Describe one pressure point in your life right now. How does the truth that God is everlasting help this pressure point?

Day 3

① Focusing on God's promises, read and study 2 Corinthians 1:18–22.

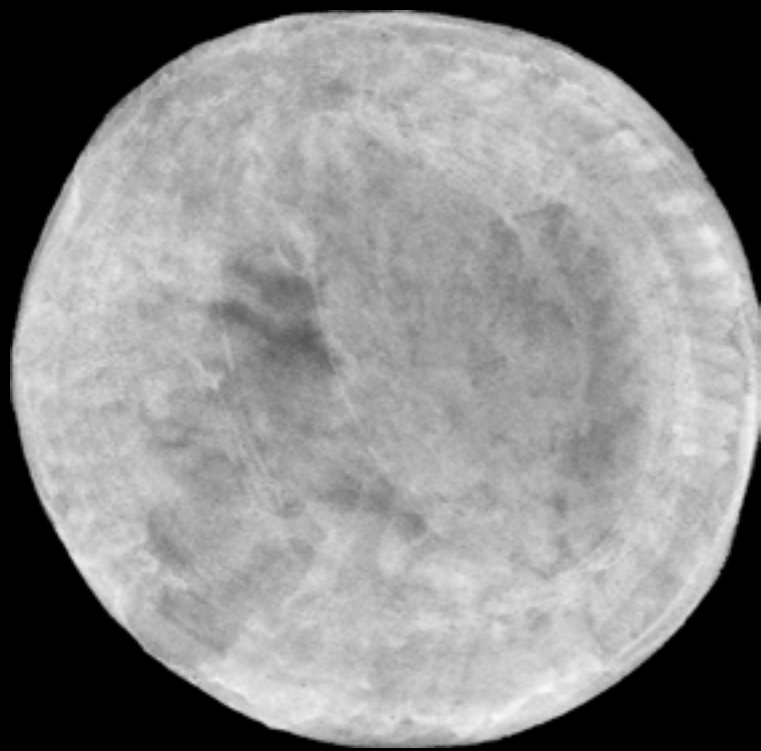
② Focusing on God's promises, read and study John 3:16–21.

Sermon Notes

176 God Will Provide
Amelia Schumann

184 Story
Christina Waldron

Week 12



172

God Will
Provide

Amelia
Schumann

God said to Abraham, “Kill your son.”

God, the maker of life, the one who hates murder, who punishes nations who sacrifice their children, said, “Kill your son.”

God, the one who called Abraham to follow him to a new land (Genesis 12), who promised to give him innumerable offspring (Genesis 15), who promised to bless all the families of the earth through his offspring, told him, “Kill your son.”

Actually, to be precise, he said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you” (Genesis 22:2).

It wasn’t a rebellious, evil son that Abraham was being asked to kill, nor one of many sons, though even then, “kill your son” would be an unthinkable task. No, Isaac was his *only* son, the son whom Abraham *loved*; he was *the* son through whom God had promised to give Abraham many offspring to bless the earth (Genesis 17).

Knowing this, we inevitably and incredulously ask, *why would God tell Abraham to kill Isaac?* Yet astonishingly, though he undoubtedly felt crippled by the weight of God’s command, Abraham did not question God. He simply obeyed.

What a beautiful testimony to God’s goodness, faithfulness, and provision! Abraham’s actions essentially said, “God, I don’t understand, but I will obey you because I trust you. You are a far better gift than the things you’ve given me. And I know You; You will provide.”

Abraham even said to Isaac, “God will provide for himself the lamb for the burnt offering” (Genesis 22:8). He

knew God, and he knew that God would certainly do as he had promised. Even if Isaac had died, Abraham knew God could simply raise him from the dead to fulfill that promise (Hebrews 11:19).

Well, as I said, Abraham obeyed. He took Isaac, prepared him to be a burnt offering, and was about to drive his knife into his own son.

But God stopped him. God instead provided a ram to be killed in Isaac’s stead, and Abraham named that place, “the LORD will provide.”

God’s provision of that ram is a strong foreshadowing of the ultimate provision of his own Son, his *only* son, whom he *loved* (John 3:16), *the* Son through whom he promised to bless the families of the earth by saving them (Luke 1:66–79). But this time, there was no ram to die in his place. No, only Jesus could bear the burden of our sin, as the only God-man, the only sinless being. He died in the stead of a death-deserving people (that’s us). With no ram qualified to take his place, Jesus actually died, and God raised him from the dead. God fulfilled his promise, even though it looked hopeless and bleak. And so we can say with incredulous joy, “The LORD has provided.”

So how does all this inform your day-to-day? Well, here’s how I hope it informs mine:

1. God has a good and perfect plan for everything he asks me to do. Even when it feels awkward or frightening... as when the Holy Spirit prompts me to approach a complete stranger and ask them some questions, hoping for an opportunity to share what Jesus has done for me. God will use me to

accomplish his purposes, and it’s not my job (as it wasn’t Abraham’s) to answer all the “whys” and “hows.”

2. God has provided Jesus as the substitute to pay the punishment I deserve for my sins. I do not obey God in order to be good enough for God to love me; I obey because, at my worst, God made me his child, and now I find joy and sweet communion when I obey him.

3. God has provided our greatest possible need (salvation) in the greatest possible way (sending His Son), at the greatest possible cost to himself (killing His only, beloved Son). If he’s done that, I know he will provide for all my needs (Romans 8:32). I am not saying that I will never suffer and lack basic things in this life. In fact, I’m pretty much guaranteed that I will suffer. But even if I starve and lack the necessities of living now, God will one day provide those things forever in heaven.

4. The things I do have now (an earthly family and church family; a home; delicious, nourishing food; pure, clean water; a wardrobe full of clothing; and much more) are amazing gifts. And because they are so amazing, they remind me that God is even greater than these things, since he made them all! So as the only being who is greater than everything else, God’s greatest gift of all to me is *himself*—and though I cannot yet enjoy him perfectly, I don’t have to wait until heaven to enjoy him. That’s why I want to spend time with him through prayer and reading his Word: to enjoy him more.

God has provided our substitute.
God has provided salvation. God has
provided himself.

Trust him.

God will provide.

Day 1

- ① Disclaimer: God does not want human sacrifice. Read Genesis 22. Describe Abraham's emotional state and mindset throughout chapter 22. Note verse five.

- ② Write out five observations on verse one. Define test. How does verse one impact the way you interpret this chapter?

- ③ Write out five observations on verse two. Describe the test. Does God offer any rewards?

- ④ Read and study Matthew 3:17 and 1 John 4:9 to describe God's love for his own son.

- ⑤ Compare Genesis 22:6 with John 19:17. Describe Isaac's obedience to his father (compare with Hebrews 5:8 and John 10:18).

Day 2

- ① Read Genesis 22. Describe the various details that foreshadow Jesus' crucifixion.

- ② Read Genesis 22:9–14. Abraham did not have to sacrifice his own son. But, God did what Abraham did not have to. Study John 3:16.

- ③ Read Genesis 22:13–14 and John 1:29. How does “the Lord will provide” apply to us? See also Revelation 13:8, Isaiah 53:6–7, and Romans 5:6–8.

- ④ Read Genesis 22:15–24. God bound himself with an oath that he would keep his promise. How does Hebrews 6:18–20 help us understand why he did this? What is the “hope set before us”?

- ⑤ Describe God's testing of Israel in the wilderness in Exodus 16 (specifically note verse 14). Why did God do this? Why do you think Israel failed this test?

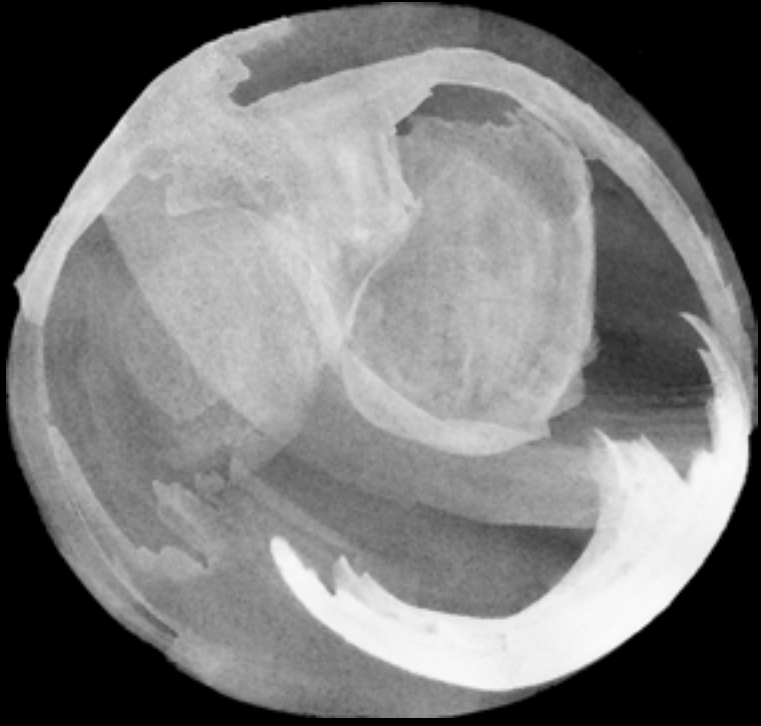
Day 3

- ① Study 1 Peter 1:6–7. Does God test us? If so, why? Give an example of testing and trials in your life.

- ② Read and study 2 Corinthians 13:5–8. How is examining and testing a part of your Christian faith journey?

Sermon Notes

NOBLE
CHRISTIAN



The question of my salvation used to be obvious. It was high school, beginning of my senior year, Wednesday night youth group. The gospel was presented, I signed a card, and the decision was made. It was obvious because at the time, I did not attend a church, nor did my culturally Buddhist parents. It was obvious because I wanted what Jesus offered. So that was it, my born-again experience.

I started attending church with friends, tuned my radio to KTLA, uttered fewer curse words. I attended a Bible college where I read and studied the Bible, went on a missions trip, and learned

how to pray out loud. Afterwards, I had my wedding in a church, with hymns and Scripture. Some years later, our children were dedicated to the Lord one by one, and all Christian holy days were observed.

For several years, I went through all these motions and never questioned my faith. In fact, I didn't really question anything, or have questions, or seek out God. What I did seek out was doing the correct things to be good and moral in the eyes of Christians, and trying to make myself "right with God" based on my adherence to the rules. It may not have been a theology I expressed explicitly, but it

was there, hiding out with my other sins. I was one of those who knew of Jesus, but did not know Jesus, the depth of his love, or the fullness of his nature. I believed in God as a creator, but never knew that he was also sovereign and infinite, perfectly just and full of grace, omnipotent and omniscient and true. I had a very shallow faith.

Then one night, God proclaimed his glory to my foolish heart. It was through a sermon jam of all things. My husband had just had his own spiritual awakening some weeks prior, and nothing could quench his excitement. He had just dis-

covered John Piper, and we sat down to watch a few videos he found that day. I was riveted. By the time two minutes had passed, I was forced to ask myself, "Do I make the gospel look beautiful? If the people I most love on this earth were to die, would God be enough for me? Would I call Him good? Is Jesus my treasure?" In that moment, God did a miraculous work in my heart, and I surrendered. I let go of all the control and power and righteousness I once claimed to be my own. All the things I had done to please people and gain their acceptance became meaningless. God was

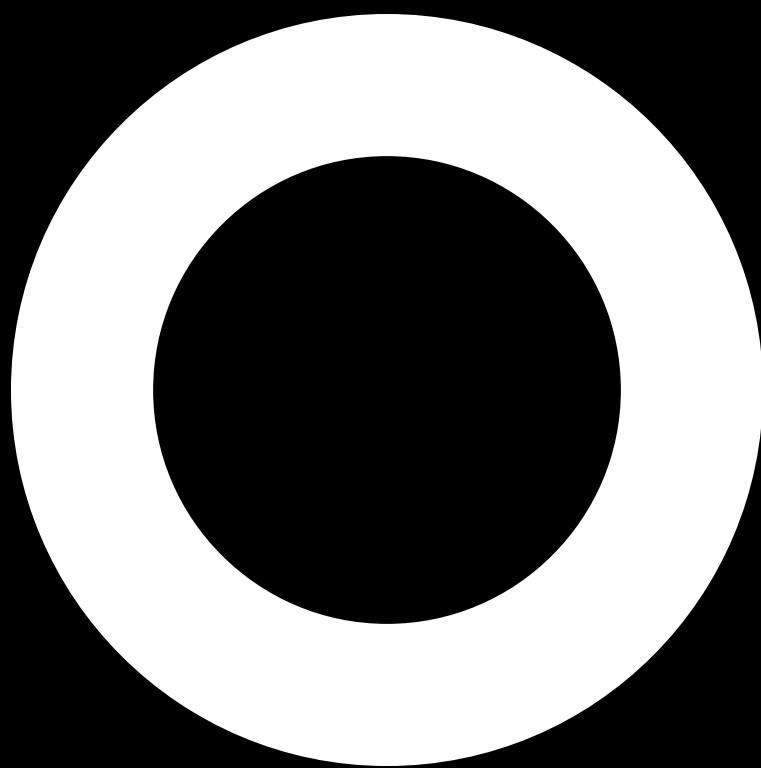
just too magnificent and holy to be anything but the center of my life.

Since then, I have begun to really know God, to commune with Him, to love Him. There has been so much spiritual fruit and grace and growth. I pray for my husband more, apologize to my children first to bring peace, examine my heart continually to make sure that my motives are pure. And none of this was my own doing. God is the one who makes me see Him fully, and now, I am rightly and lovingly worshiping Him.

Week 13

HE HAS
GRANTED
TO US HIS

PRECIOUS AND VERY GREAT PROMISES



192

Genesis 23

Jeff Waldron

“While I can, I sail east in the Dawn Treader. When she fails me, I paddle east in my coracle. When she sinks, I shall swim east with my four paws. And when I can swim no longer, if I have not reached Aslan’s country, or shot over the edge of the world in some vast cataract, I shall sink with my nose to the sunrise and Peepiceek will be head of the talking mice in Narnia.”
—Reepicheep

Something wonderful happens when we behold an enduring, transcendent conviction. Our imaginations are at once seduced—what if I were that captivated with something?

History has been shaped by men and women who had a lasting impact due in large part to an enduring conviction that permeated every aspect of their existence. Abraham was such a man. A flawed man to be sure, but a man with an enduring conviction, a man of resolve. He was captivated by the Lord, and the Lord’s promises had infiltrated his life—soaked into every joint and sinew. His was a conviction that often resulted in decisive and purposeful action. He built altars, he made sacrifices, he obeyed without protest, without trying to creatively spin the words to get around what was clear.

He obeyed the arduous and costly: “Forsake your country and your kindred.”

Yes, Lord, I will follow where you lead.

He obeyed the painful and awkward: “Circumcise yourself and every male among you.”

Yes, Lord, I will sharpen my knives.

He obeyed the unbearable: “Sacrifice your son.”

Yes, Lord, I . . . I trust you.

Upon the death of his wife, Sarah, we again see Abraham’s enduring conviction, but not as a response to an explicit command, rather we see it simply as the personal actions of a man who is captivated by the Lord’s promises to him. Where no explicit command is given, Abraham’s convictions drive his actions.

THE CAVE OF MACHPELAH

Many years prior to Sarah’s death, Abraham and Sarah had settled in Canaan by the oaks of Mamre and built an altar to the Lord. They were sojourners and foreigners among the Hittites, the occupiers of the land of Canaan. Upon Sarah’s death, Abraham had resolved to bury his wife in the Cave of Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, and was owned by a Hittite named Ephron.

As the Hittites congregated at the gate of the city, Abraham addressed Ephron, offering to purchase the cave for the full price. Ephron offered, probably as a matter of custom or a showing of feigned generosity, to give the cave to Abraham—“My lord, listen to me: a piece of land worth 400 shekels of silver, what is that between you and me? Bury your dead.” Though the land was not worth 400 shekels, Abraham turned down the gift and paid the full, inflated amount. Abraham did not protest, he did not try to get a better price, and he did not consider other locations. His wife would be buried in the Cave of Machpelah, whatever the cost. There seems to be a reverence of sort for the cave and the plot of land, such that he would not degrade it by engaging in negotiation of the price.

Why was Abraham so determined? Given his steadfast resolve it seems likely that he made the decision in light of God’s promise to give the land to him and his offspring. In advance of God fulfilling the promise, Abraham was securing the unassailable legal title to a very significant portion of the promised land: the place where his wife would be buried, the place where he would be buried when he followed her in death years later. Isaac and Rebekah would be buried there, as would Leah and Jacob. In fact, Jacob’s final command to his sons is to bury him with his fathers “in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite.” The Cave of Machpelah became quite significant.

As far as we know, the purchase of the cave was not in response to an explicit command God gave to Abraham, rather it was an expression of the enduring conviction that was ever pulsing through his veins: he made decisions in light of the promise, we might say his actions were inspired by God.

CAPTIVATED BY JESUS

Rather than striving to live like Christians, perhaps we should strive to be people who are captivated by Jesus. May he so penetrate our hearts that we cannot help but act in a manner that glorifies him. Pray earnestly for this. Read the Scriptures expectantly and joyfully, longing to know Jesus intimately. Pray for God to work and give you a desire for Him that can only come from Him.

But make no mistake, a Christian acts. Like Abraham, I pray we invest our time, money, reputations, and comforts to acquire a small portion

of the promised land in advance of its full realization. Not out of a sense of duty, but out of desire. We need to have lives with margin (financially, temporally, otherwise) so we can act when our convictions and Jesus-captivated desires call us to do so.

I pray that we become a captivated people who overflow with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; not out of effort, but by merely being. Happy people don't strive to laugh, their laughter springs forth because of their joy. May we overflow with fruits of the Spirit not because we are striving to do so, but because we are so Spirit-filled that it is just how we live. Let us be a people who make decisions in light of the promise, a people inspired by Jesus.

Day 1

- ① Read Genesis 22:20–23:20. The author reminds the reader of Abraham’s eastern relatives. This is preparing for the introduction of the story of the marriage between Isaac and Rebekah. What happens in Genesis 23 prior to that marriage? Describe the family dynamics at this point.

- ② Read Genesis 11:27–30, 22:20–24, and 24:15. Lay out and describe the family members involved. Specifically note how Rebekah fits into the family. Note how many sons Nahor has.

- ③ In Genesis 12:2 it is implied that with Abraham’s descendants becoming a great nation, they will possess the Promised Land. Up until this point Abraham has only sojourned in this Promised Land, not owned it. What significant shift happens in this story regarding the land (Genesis 23:17–18)?

- ④ Where was the ancient city Hebron located?

- ⑤ Define mourn. Define weep. Describe Abraham’s emotional state at this point.

Day 2

- ① Read Genesis 23. Abraham interacts with the Hittites. Describe how this relationship plays out between them and Israel (Genesis 15:18–21; Exodus 3:8, 23:28; Deuteronomy 7:1–5, 20:17).

- ② Describe the bartering process between Abraham and this group he is buying the land from. How does Abraham refer to himself (v.4)? Why do you think they refer to Abraham as a prince of God (v.6)?

- ③ Why do you think Abraham doesn't want the land for free? Compare with Genesis 14:21–24. Why do you think Ephron wants to give the land to Abraham for free?

- ④ The real estate transaction is complete and Abraham for the first time is in possession of a small piece of the Promised Land. Why did the author include all the details in Genesis 23 of this transaction?

- ⑤ Describe the significance of this plot of land from Genesis 49:28–33.

Day 3

- ① Remember Sarah's life by skimming over Genesis 11:27–23:2 and note everywhere Sarai or Sarah is mentioned. Imagine sitting down with Sarah for lunch. Write out what you would say to her. Starting the conversation, what would you say to her about her life that you admire? In an effort to make conversation, what parts of her life would you try to relate to and why? Finally, what questions would you ask her that you would love to have more information on and why?
- ② Read and study 1 Peter 3:1–7. How is Sarah introduced into this passage? How does this compare with what you know of Sarah's life? See also Ephesians 5:21 and Philippians 2:3–4 that can be applied to successful marriages where each person puts the other's interests above their own.

Sermon Notes

Week 14

Faithfulness of a Servant

Eric Beise



203

Often the busyness and grind of life narrows my perspective. I can get so caught up in running from one activity to the next, I find it easy to put my faith in a box that I open on Sundays at corporate worship, Wednesdays for community/life group, and during my time in the Bible. I often fail to live out my faith in daily tasks. I want to handle the responsibilities of life with diligence while making time to enjoy all the good things God has given me, yet when my capacity is near its max, my natural bent is away from the Lord instead of trusting him with decisions. My heart can be hard and I treat myself as a god, thinking I know best and failing to be thankful and worship the Lord for all he provides.

I imagine Abraham's servant felt life's grind. He was in charge of all of Abraham's possessions. I like to think of Abraham's servant as a sort of CEO of Abraham's affairs. The amount of decisions he must have had to make on a day-to-day basis seems staggering, so if anyone can understand the busyness of life, he can. He already has a lot on his plate, so adding the extra task of finding a wife for the heir of Abraham might seem exceedingly daunting. With this massive task at hand, we see Abraham's servant take three pivotal actions of faithfulness: ask, worship, and tell. These actions provide a practical framework for us to be faithful; they are important to recognize and imitate.

ASK:

When charged with finding a wife for Isaac, the first thing the servant does when starting his search is ask the Lord for direction. Genesis 24:12-14 is his prayer upon entering into the

town of Abraham's people. We should take note of the timing. He doesn't start by creating a canvassing strategy for him and his entourage to sweep through the town and find all the prospects. He doesn't immediately jump into action, engaging in conversation with all the single women to find the nicest, most attractive one to bring home to Isaac. First, he prays. By the simple fact that he puts first things first, he acknowledges his need for the Lord's help and guidance. The Lord blesses the servant not because of the specific words he uses, but rather because of the posture of the heart from which the prayer came.

WORSHIP:

Upon the confirmation that Rebekah is of Abraham's kinsman, the servant worships. Genesis 24:26 says, "The man bowed his head and worshiped the Lord." In verse 27 it goes on to detail out his exact words of worship. The servant left no room for interpretation in attributing the finding of Rebekah to the Lord. He was so thankful, his worship came even before continuing his conversation with Rebekah. The servant was overcome by the Lord's faithfulness to Abraham (and by association, himself) he could not even finish a conversation. He was compelled to worship, it was public, it was audible, and he was unashamed of it.

TELL:

As the servant explained the full story of his journey to Laban, it could have been easy for him to leave out his heart conversation with the Lord (Gen 24:42-45). No one knew it happened. He could have easily taken the

glory for himself. Yet, because the servant shared the whole story, including how the Lord answered his prayer, both Laban and Bethuel are encouraged. They realize the Lord is at work. It is the faithfulness of the servant through the action of telling the group what the Lord has done, that encourages the faithfulness of Laban and Bethuel. His actions help them to see that this all is a part of God's will. At this point the servant's oath is complete. He found a wife for Isaac, even if she doesn't come back with him, he has fulfilled his oath (Gen 24:9). He no longer holds any obligation, so in a sense, things are good. Yet when it's decided Rebekah will move, "he bowed himself to the earth before the Lord." (Gen 24:52). He continues in faithfulness and thanksgiving even in the good times! It no longer matters to his oath if Rebekah comes; he already found her. But even so, his first response is visible, audible praise in front of everyone. He didn't wait, he didn't act silently, it wasn't a little nod to God in the corner of the room. He was unashamed of his praise. He knows he wasn't the one calling the shots, it was the Lord working in his everyday life and he tells of the work of the Lord.

In each part of the model it is important to realize the priority the servant puts on acting immediately. He wastes no time in any of the situations to reflect who has the true power, namely the Lord. The servant is constantly being faithful throughout this story by asking, worshiping, and telling others about the ways of the Lord in his daily life. The servant is being faithful by being a mirror to

others that reflects the grace that God has bestowed upon his endeavors.

Did you notice how many times I referenced the *servant*? How many times he was not called by a proper name? From earlier in Genesis, we have an idea of who the servant is, yet chapter 24 doesn't mention his proper name once. This is not a coincidence. The servant was a faithful model for us yet he gets no glory. His faithfulness is giving glory to the Lord. His methods encourage others to glorify the Lord. He gets no praise. His joy is in the Lord. By imitating his model we have a practical way to glorify the Lord in the grind of our lives.

Day 1

- ① Read Genesis 24. How does 24:1 impact the way you interpret and view Abraham's dealings up to this point? The author wants us to remember 12:1–3 in particular that God promised to bless Abraham and his descendants.

- ② Read Genesis 24:1–9. Isaac was God's fulfillment of the promise that Abraham and Sarah would have many descendants. For the promise to continue, Isaac needs a wife. How does Abraham help make this happen? Describe Abraham's level of confidence and faith in God at this point and how he got to this point.

- ③ Read Genesis 24:10–14. Describe what specific looks like from these verses and how this plays out. Describe the state of your prayer life. What do you want your prayer life to look like, why, and what changes are you going to make to take a step in that direction?

- ④ Read Genesis 24:15–28. Study vv.26–27 and describe the servant's response.

- ⑤ Read Genesis 24:29–33. Are you surprised by Laban's response? Explain.

Day 2

- ① Read Genesis 24. Why was Abraham so determined that Isaac should not go with the servant back to their home country?

- ② How did Abraham's servant go about discerning God's will as to which girl was the right one? How do you go about discerning God's will in such matters? See Romans 12:1–3.

- ③ What are some misunderstandings about finding God's will that are common among Christians today? What passages in the Bible help you navigate these waters?

- ④ Through his many experiences with God, Abraham grew strong in faith. How are you growing stronger in faith, and what means is God using to bring about your growth?

- ⑤ Read Genesis 24:34–67. Paraphrase how the story goes. Then study verse 67.

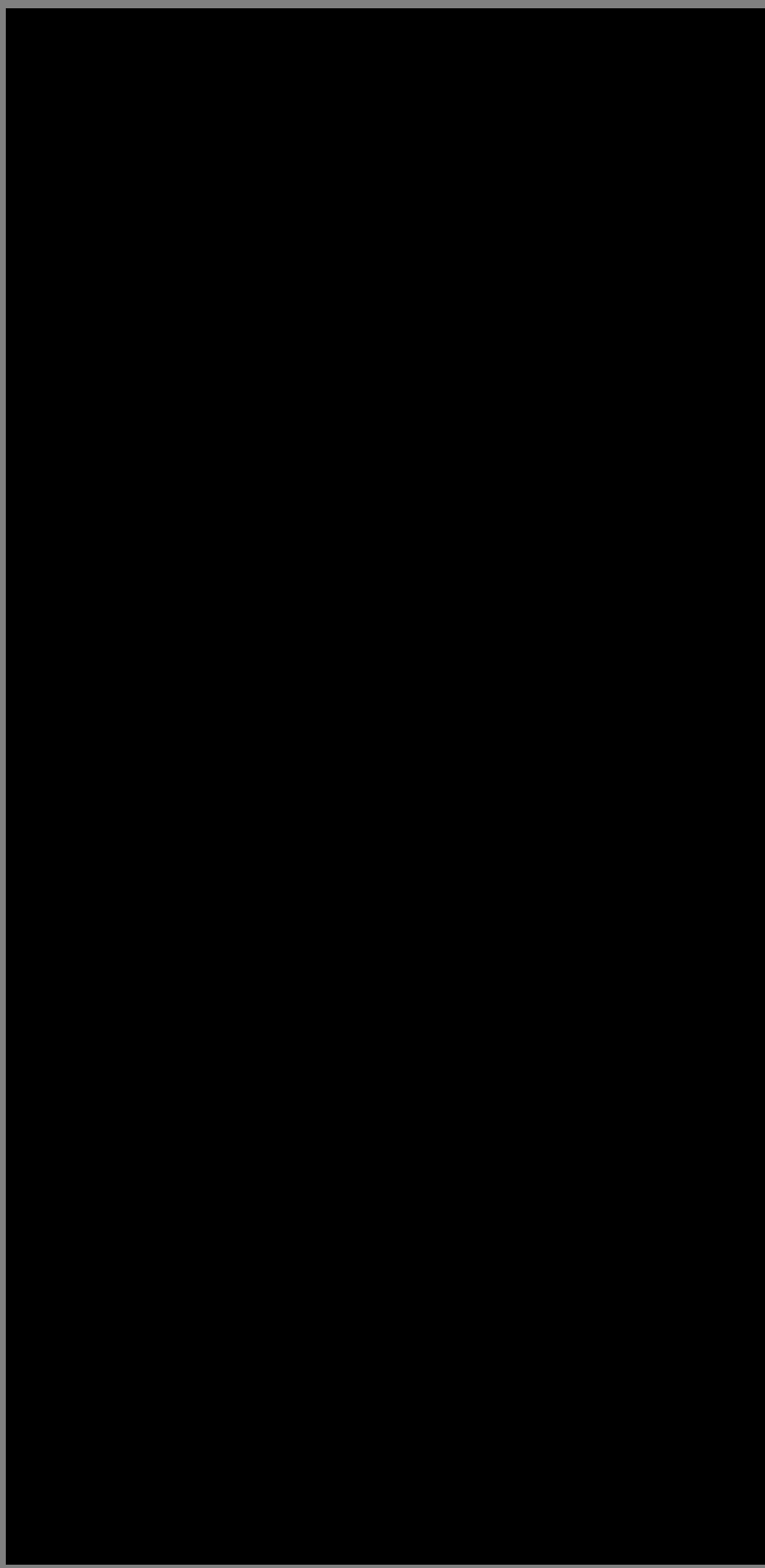
Day 3

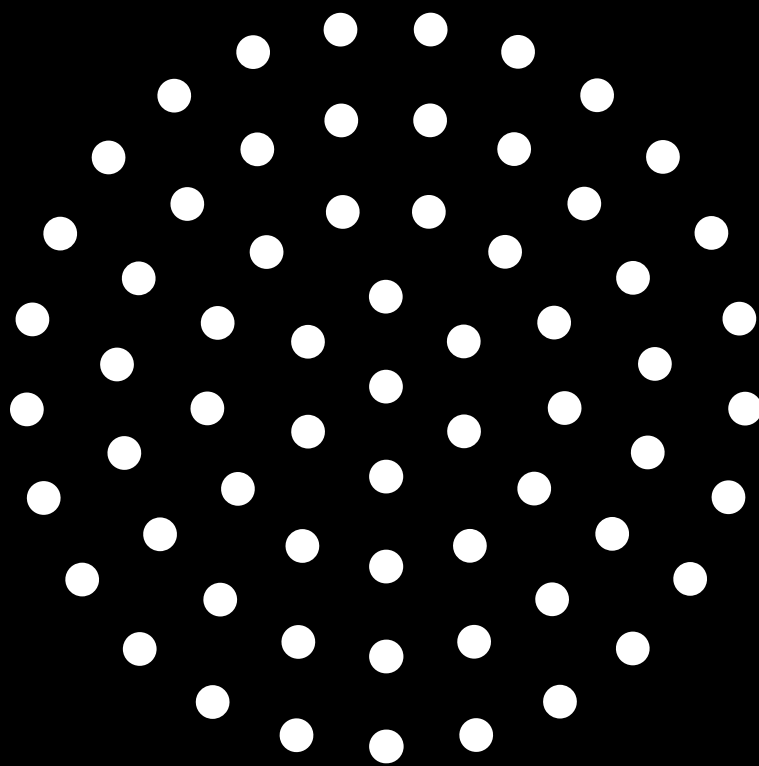
- ① In her beauty, her purity, and her chosen status, Rebekah was a picture of the bride of Christ. Yet when we look at ourselves, we do not feel worthy to be the bride of Christ. Compare and contrast the story of Rebekah (Genesis 24:15–21) at the well with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:1–29.
- ② Study Matthew 4:8–10 and 1 Corinthians 10:31 (in conjunction with Genesis 24:26–27) to learn more about glory and worship.

Sermon Notes

Week 15

God Keeps His Promises





Do you ever hold up your circumstances next to what God has promised and see a gap? Like: “God, you promised *insert promise here* but, I look around at my life and it seems to not be true for me at all.” It sounds bad, but I find that temptation is in my twisted heart more often than I’d like to admit.

It is because of this that I resonate with Rebekah in Genesis 25:22. In this chapter, God finally answered Isaac and Rebekah’s prayer to give them a child, but then the pregnancy is very difficult. Rebekah exclaims something along the lines of “If this pregnancy is from you, fulfilling the promise you gave to Abraham, why is it so hard?” I have never struggled with infertility nor have I endured a difficult pregnancy (or any pregnancy at all thus far), but I do feel a deep empathy bubble up in my heart as I read the narrative of Rebekah questioning the Lord while looking at her circumstance.

To understand Rebekah’s context, we need to zoom out for a second. The whole first half of Genesis 25 is a list of Abraham’s descendants and what happened to them all. If you are anything like me, this is an example of a part of the Bible that is tempting to skip over. You know, the list of names you can hardly pronounce and then they travel to places that you have never heard of...blah, blah, blah. I used to find this an inefficient way to spend my precious time in the Word so I was always tempted to flip to some good ol’ Gospels or Pauline epistles to get my “nugget” to hold onto throughout the day. Thankfully, the Lord has humbled and corrected me. No time in the Bible is “inefficient.” God put it all there for a reason. This

part of Genesis 25 is no different and we need to start here to understand the weight Rebekah’s complaint. This list of names in Abraham’s heritage is a big deal. We know that earlier in Genesis, God promised that Abraham (then named Abram) would have offspring “more numerous than the stars” and would bless the whole earth (Genesis 12:1–3). Then we learn that heir is Isaac and it is through his line that the promise will be fulfilled. So, with all that as the backdrop, we can fast-forward to Rebekah and see that her questioning has a lot more weight.

Put yourself in her sandals: She just married this guy Isaac and he is the chosen heir of God’s people. If I were her, I would take that to mean that it is pretty much guaranteed that I would be able to have kids no problem, right? Well, come to find out that Rebekah is barren. It was not until they struggled with infertility and prayed desperately together for 19 years that she was able to conceive. That in itself would be difficult to wrestle through! To make matters more confusing, when God gives them a miracle and she does conceive, the pregnancy is rough. It is from that point that we now hear the depth of her exasperation in her cry to the Lord: “if it is thus, why is this happening to me?” (Genesis 25:22). And it is in this brief part of Genesis 25 that God mercifully shows us a few things about His promises and how He works.

GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES.

God has a way of making sure we know that it is Him and Him alone that can fulfil his promise, defying human wisdom and the laws of nature.

This seems like an obvious truth to the average Christian, but it is easy for us to forget that we worship the God who made *everything* and is not bound by *anything*. A promised legacy more numerous than the stars but... No heir? Old age? Barren womb? No problem for our God. In His grace, God let Isaac and Rebekah get to the end of their human devices before He gave them the answer to their prayers and fulfilment to His promise so they would know—beyond the shadow of a doubt—that God is the giver of life and the keeper of His promise. What a comfort to us!

GOD HAS A PLAN

Later in our story in Genesis 25, we learn that God uses Rebekah’s sons, Jacob and Esau, and their struggle in the womb not to punish Rebekah at all but to foreshadow Israel’s future. God declares that “the older shall serve the younger.” In their day, this was absurd. The eldest was always the favored one with the most responsibility and the one to receive the inheritance. Yet, God makes human wisdom seem foolish because he is the only one to see the Plan. Because we have the whole Bible narrative, we know that later Esau sells his birthright for some stew (Genesis 25:34) and then Esau’s line, the Edomites, eventually serves Jacob’s line, Israel (2 Samuel 8:14). Later, Paul refers to this split again and reveals that God used it to teach us about God’s calling: “Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the young-

er” (Romans 9:11–12). If it were not so, then we would be able to work our way to God. But, God is so for His glory and full of grace that He decisively weaves it into the fabric of history through Rebekah’s story, and then Jacob and Esau’s struggle, that salvation is His will not our work. How freeing to know that “it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (Romans 9:16).

GOD WELCOMES OUR DEEPEST HEART QUESTIONS

Rebekah didn’t understand what was going on at the time. In fact, it seemed really unfair and frustrating. Yet, in the midst of her confusion we are told, “she went to inquire of the Lord” (Genesis 25:22). This is a beautiful picture of faith. She went to the Lord *in* her doubt and questioning because she knew He was the only Source. She took her mess of emotions and questions and went *to* the Lord instead of grumbling against Him and pulling away or waiting until she understood it all. This is what faith looks like when circumstances seem to lack the fulfilment of God’s promise. It gets better: because of Jesus, we can inquire of the Lord with *more* confidence than Rebekah ever had. THE King Jesus intercedes for us (Rom 8:34). What a comfort to our soul!

Knowing all of this does not promise that the doubt will be less confusing or that the pain will be easier, but, I pray that in our confusion, we would know full well that we can run to Him, He will give us the mercies we need for the day (Lam 3:23) and it will all turn out for our joy and His glory. In Jesus, we know that no matter what, God is for us and not

against us (Romans 8:31). Because we know Jesus, as we wait in the midst of confusing circumstances we have a clearer hope to cling to than Rebekah ever knew. Let us live as those who have a sure and steadfast hope that someday all of the sad and confusing things will be made right when we see King Jesus face to face and God’s redemptive plan will be complete. He promises He is making all things new (Revelation 21:5). No matter what you are going through, take heart, the best is yet to come. We can bank on the fact that God has a Plan and He will fulfil His promises in His perfect timing: He has spoken and He will do it (Ezekiel 36:36).

“So, keep waiting for him. Keep believing in him. Keep trusting that the story isn’t over yet. God’s promises never fail and the Promised One never disappoints.”

—Kevin DeYoung

Day 1

- ① Read Genesis 25. Review Genesis 12:2 and 17:6. How many children did Abraham end up having through Sarah, Hagar, and Keturah? How does this play out with all of these descendants? See Genesis 25:11.

- ② Read Genesis 25:1–11. Abraham dies. Which promises did Abraham live to see fulfilled? Which did he hold only by faith when he died?

- ③ Compare Genesis 25:7–8 with Genesis 15:15.

- ④ Which of God's promises to you will be fulfilled while you are alive, and which will you inherit when you die?

- ⑤ Though Abraham had some earlier faults, he ended his life well. From Isaac's birth onward, he demonstrates a steady confidence in God (see Genesis 26:5 and Matthew 25:21). What are the three most impactful truths you learned or wrestled with through this study on Abraham, and why?

Day 2

- ① Read Genesis 25. God is far from hostile or even indifferent to the non-chosen; he deeply cares for all the nations of the world. Describe five important points or events from this chapter.

- ② Read Genesis 25:12–18. What do we know about Ishmael’s life up to this point (e.g. 16:12 and 21:18)?

- ③ Read Genesis 25:19–26. Review 12:1–3 because it applies to the next chosen son. What is significant about the birth of these twin boys? Why do you think the author included this story?

- ④ Read Genesis 25:27–34. The author includes the birth story of these boys (must be significant) and then moves quickly forward to the boys’ adolescent or young adult years. Paraphrase the story. In what ways does this story of Jacob remind us of the truth in 1 Corinthians 1:26–31?

- ⑤ Read Romans 9 and Malachi 1:1–5. Study Romans 9:10–13. What point(s) is Paul making in Romans 9 and how does the story of Jacob and Esau support his points?

Day 3

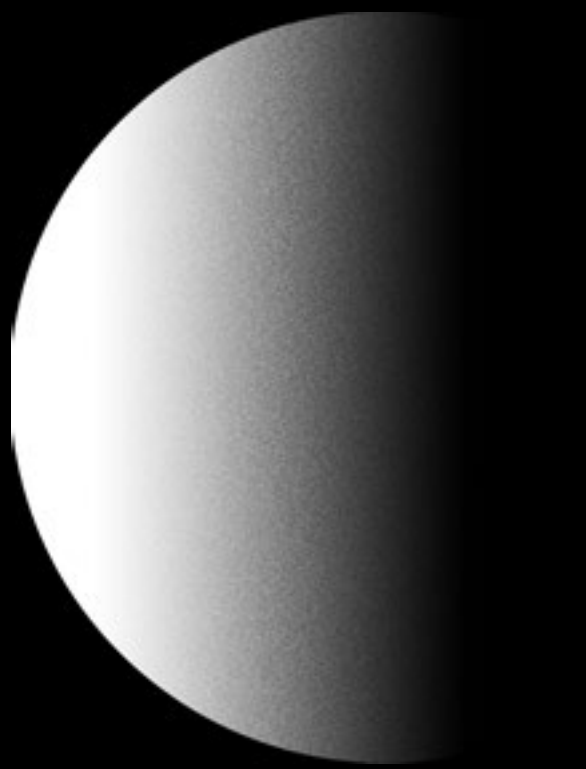
- ① A reality gap is the difference between what God has promised and what you see now in this moment in time. Describe the various ways in which Abraham dealt with his reality gaps. What are your reality gaps? How will you deal with them differently because of what you have learned from studying the life of Abraham? What verse or passage in the Bible is a great resource to help you?
- ② Read Revelation 21. Study Revelation 21:3–4.

Sermon Notes

226 A Better Man
Mike Schumann

234 Story
Ashley Vradenburg

Week 16



222

A Better Man

Mike
Schumann

Sometimes the Old Testament just feels foreign to us. It seems like a bunch of weird stories written about a strange people who lived in a land we've never been to. And yet, at other times, it can hit us with such a striking familiarity that it awakens us to the fact that these were real human beings who dealt with real human issues. This is one such story.

It begins with a man named Isaac and a woman named Rebekah. They were married, but you wouldn't know it by the appearance of things. In fact, if you were to ask the locals about these two, they would say that they were brother and sister. I'll admit, this is where it seems a bit strange, but let's dig a little deeper to find out what's really going on.

Isaac and Rebekah had recently left their homeland in response to a famine and were on their way to Egypt when God spoke to Isaac, telling him to settle in Gerar. Moreover, Isaac was told that God would be with them in Gerar, bless them, give them the land, and along with it, a multitude of offspring with which to dwell there. This is certainly a great blessing, and this is exactly why Isaac's response is so shocking.

Upon entering Gerar, Isaac was asked about Rebekah and he responded that she was his sister. His sister? Why would a man who was bound for such incredible blessing make such a foolish claim? The answer is that Isaac was motivated by fear of death. Note: his exact words were, "lest the men of the place should kill *me* because of *Rebekah*" (Gen. 26:7). That's right, Isaac wanted to save his own skin and he believed that the men of Gerar would look upon Rebekah, see her beauty,

and then kill her husband in order that they might take her as their own.

The most painful part of this story is that there is not even a hint of care for Rebekah in Isaac's words. In fact, by claiming she was his sister, he was essentially throwing his wife to the wolves. Furthermore, this was not a decision that Isaac made and then a day later regretted. In reality, it seems like Isaac would have been content to live out this lie indefinitely as long as it meant him keeping his life. The text even says that "when they had been there *a long time*" (Gen. 26:8), King Abimelech saw Isaac and Rebekah together and realized they were not brother and sister but husband and wife. Upon Abimelech's questioning, Isaac was forced to explain himself, and his words would be almost comical if they had not been so pathetic. He simply states, "I thought, 'Lest I die because of *her*'" (Gen. 26:9).

On first glance this cowardly act of Isaac's simply reeks of fear. Yet, his fears are only the petals of this flower. Below the flower and supporting its petals is a strong stem of doubt. This doubt manifested in his disbelief of God's promise to bless him and his family. Underneath the stem, however, we see the real root of it all, the life source that keeps this entire plant alive. This root is self-love, and from it flow evil thoughts, murder, adultery, and a myriad of other sins (Matt. 15:19).

What are we to do with such a story? Obviously we react with anger toward Isaac and feel immense sadness for Rebekah, but is there something more? One answer is that this story shows us the true ugliness of unbridled sin. It demonstrates

that in all of our hearts is an innate desire to throw others under the bus in order that our lives might be saved. Furthermore, it reveals our natural inclination toward doubting God's good promises. He tells us that he has good things in store, and yet we panic and take things into our own hands. This is all true and it is difficult to swallow, yet it is good to be reminded of our fallenness, for it causes us to rely more on God.

Still however, another question should be running through our minds. This same question ought to pervade our minds whenever we read the Bible, whether Old or New Testament. The question is namely this, what does this story teach me about Jesus? It's in answering this question that true riches are unearthed.

Fast-forward 2,000 years after Isaac and see a man on his knees in a garden. His hair is unkempt, his feet are dirty from walking, and the sweat pouring from his brow is tinged with blood. This is Jesus; he like Isaac is also a husband to a wife (the church) and dwelling in a new land. Upon entering this land, Jesus was also aware of the danger that lay before him because of his wife. In fact, his death was certain, not speculative. Furthermore, it would be a slow death, one marked by physical torture as well as emotional and verbal abuse.

As similar as their situations are, Jesus' actions demonstrate that he is entirely unlike Isaac. Jesus is not merely a better husband, he is the best husband. He is the husband who willingly and painfully dies in place of his wife. In doing so, he not only protects his wife from death, but also provides something she had not yet possessed,

eternal life. This is the great husband of the church, this is the one whom we are married to. He is our better protector, our better husband...our better man.

Day 1

- ① Read Genesis 26. What is one positive and one negative you see in Jacob's life from this chapter?

- ② Read Genesis 12 and 26:1–5 and compare. Study 26:5. Given all that you have studied thus far in Genesis, how can the author say what he does about Abraham in verse five?

- ③ Read Genesis 26:6–11 and compare with 12:13. What do you think about Isaac's actions in this passage?

- ④ Read Genesis 26:12–16. Define "envy." Why did the Philistines envy Isaac? Can envy be a sinful attitude? Explain. How does the gospel impact your heart when you have envy?

- ⑤ Read Genesis 26:15–22. Why are the wells an issue? What happens?

Day 2

- ① Read Genesis 26. What are you learning about God in this progression from Abraham to Isaac?

- ② Read Genesis 26:23–25. What fears do you have? In what ways can God help you by saying “fear not”? See Isaiah 41:8–10, 43:3–7; Jeremiah 42:11.

- ③ Read Genesis 26:26–33. It is striking that Abimelech uses the name Yahweh (LORD) in verse 28. See Exodus 3. What is the meaning of the name Yahweh?

- ④ Read Genesis 26:34–35. What do we learn in this passage that probably leads Rebekah to side with Jacob in 27:1–13?

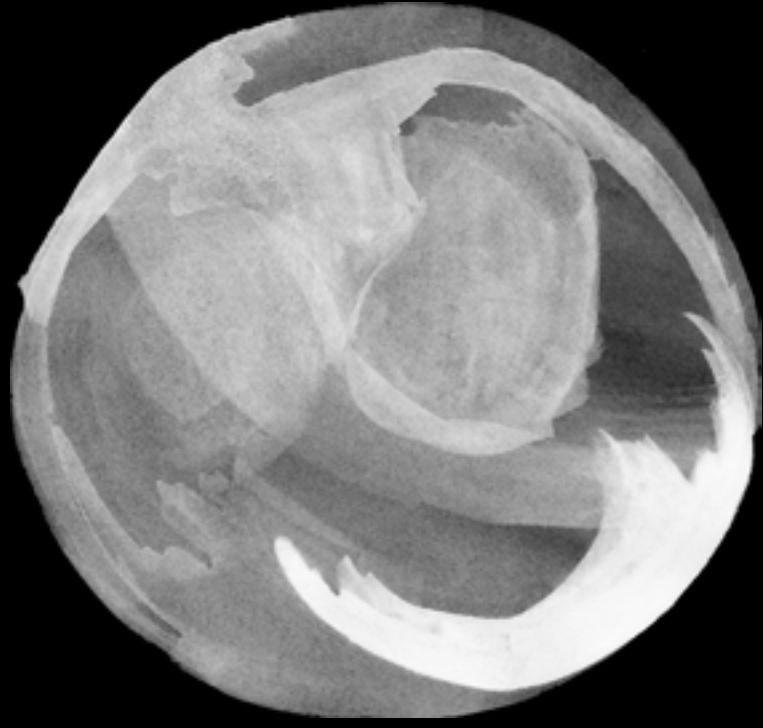
- ⑤ Review Genesis 26. What sinful patterns do we see Isaac repeat from his father Abraham?

Day 3

- ① In Genesis 26 we see Isaac repeat some sins of his father Abraham. Read Exodus 20:5–6. We learn that we are often more susceptible to the sins of our parents. Wisdom suggests that we recognize that and take steps to avoid continuing the pattern. If you could drop into Isaac's life in Genesis 26, what would you say to him in regards to counsel?
- ② We have control over our attitude, not circumstances around us. What can you change in your life to better your relationship with your children? If you don't have children, what can you do today to help prepare for that day, should you have children someday?

Sermon Notes

Established
Broadway



Growing up I lived in a household where one of my parents was Mormon and one was a nominal Christian. By God's grace and love towards me, my parents let my brother and I choose which church we wanted to attend. Since the Mormon Church services were so long we decided to go with my mom to Colonial. It was definitely not a gospel-preaching church and so my view of being a Christian meant being a good person... the end. This flowed into many parts of my life. I was competitively involved in sports, specifically volleyball, in plays, in choir, the vice president of student council, was

well liked by many people, and did well in school. I had very loving parents who were and are so sacrificial. It was easy to find my hope and satisfaction in each of these areas because I would continue to excel in all of them.

As time went on, I played volleyball at the University of Minnesota, had a boyfriend that I thought I was going to marry, and loved the college life. As the volleyball season started I struggled because I was not the best anymore, school definitely did not come as easy as it did in high school, the long distance relationship with this guy was not going great,

and my parent's marriage was failing badly. My identity was being shattered! "Who am I?" and "What am I living for?" These were questions I was struggling to work through.

All of the things I was putting my hope and satisfaction in were starting to become hopeless and very unsatisfying. I was devastated! Why is this happening to me and not someone else? Little did I know that God was working in mighty ways to draw me nearer to himself. After my freshman year I stopped playing volleyball and felt like I wanted a new start. My roommate and best friend Ariana Ce-

cka invited me to come play games with her and her friends. So I went and it was very different than anything I experienced in college. These people were very intentional, asked genuine questions, and were a lot of fun without having to be drunk or high. I really enjoyed my time there, even though they were all very different than me. This intrigued me because I wanted to know what was different about them compared to the athletes I had been previously been hanging out with.

One of the people I met was Erin Martin, now Horn. She and Ari continued to pursue me and invited me to join a Bi-

ble study. I felt as though if I wanted to be a good person this is the right thing to do, so I joined. Little did I know that it would start to change my life! I continued to hang out with these people who were involved in the wonderful ministry called Campus Outreach and went on my first Christmas conference. I attended a lot of talks that started to change my perspective and views on what it means to be a Christian and who this Jesus guy really is. Yeah, I knew he died for my sins, but this was the first time I actually understood that he died for my sins!

I actually felt the depth of my sin for the first time which helped me realize the weight of the sacrifice Christ made for me. This transformed into deep dependence, repentance, and seeing God's grace and forgiveness. I realized that this wasn't some insignificant thing, but was the most significant thing ever! He did it for me, such an undeserving person. This was the first time I felt free from myself and the burdens of this world. The hope and satisfaction I was placing in school, volleyball, friends, my relationship, and my family was replaced by the only one who can

truly and fully satisfy me, Jesus! This is when my life changed.

I stayed involved in Campus Outreach and was discipled by Erin Horn, lived with Christian community, and continued to dive into his word longing to know more about him. I am very thankful to look back and see his perfect plan for my life that did not seem so perfect at the time. I was hurting and in pain, but I can just imagine him smiling and saying, “Daughter, I have far better plans for your life, trust me, I love you.”

A verse that I held so tightly to was Titus 3:3–7: “For we ourselves were once

foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing and regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”