

In the Beginning, God...

Introduction

Have you ever felt inconsistent with your faith in God?

Let's read three passages of scripture tonight and see what God might be saying to us.

1. James 1:3 (ESV) 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

2. Genesis 17:15–19 (ESV) 15 And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.

16 I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” 18 And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!”

19 God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.

3. Genesis 22:1–2 (ESV) 1 After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 2 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.”

Redemption is coming, promised through a man who was tested repeatedly by God’s providential hand. Faced with choices of faith or failure, Abraham becomes the father of the faithful failures. All who follow his footsteps in belief of God yet also fail to believe God.

That is the story of us all. Abram faced challenges and failed when he was up against it, we too face challenges and we fail because our faith falters.

Like Abraham, we believe God but then we don’t.

Let’s walk the path of Abraham’s testing, because it is our own.

Message:

I. The Ties of Nature

Gen. 12:1 “Go from your country, kindred, father’s house to the land that I will show you. . .”

God’s call was out of the familiar and into the unknown.

Leave what you are comfortable with and take up a life of wandering and searching.

When you and I come to Christ, we leave the world behind us looking for a heavenly city that will one day be revealed to us.

I think of that old song we used to sing as kids, “The world behind me, the cross before me . . . no turning back, no turning back.”

We are sojourners in this place called earth, it is not our home, we are just passing through.

Abram was called to separate from the ties of family and friends. The New Testament calls us to come apart and be separate from the world. We are not to love the things of the world for the world is passing away.

But separation does not remove pressure.

Leaving the familiar only introduces a new test—the stress of circumstances.

And faith that walks with God will always be tested by what happens next.

II. Testing of the Stress of Circumstances

Gen. 12:7, After leaving Haran when his aged father has passed, he arrives at a place called Shechem and he built an altar to the Lord.

Gen. 12:8, Then he moves further south to Bethel and again raises an altar to the Lord.

As he moves through the land of promise, he continually worships God.

Genesis 12:10 (ESV) 10 Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.

He makes the decision to move into a pagan place filled with those who take his life for his wife. Then he convinces her to act as if she is his sister.

That act almost shut down the movement of redemption in human history. The promise was to come through Sarai or Sarah as she will later be called by God.

Abram's decision required God's intervention and salvation.

The circumstances of our lives will test our faith, prove our faithfulness or instruct us that our faith needs improvement.

Sometimes the greatest pressure doesn't come from scarcity—it comes from success.

And when blessing increases, strife often follows.

III. A Trial of Strife

Lot and Abram are growing, their herds, their families, their wealth. And that growth created stress within the two tribes.

Two options are available to Abram, as the elder and the overseer of the family, he could have demanded that Lot come under his tent.

Begin to work with his herdsmen, rather than developing his own.

How we handle the strife that comes up in our lives is a witness to the faith that lives within our hearts.

We will be tested with strife from time to time. In this instance Abram passed the test, trusting God's promise and so he gave to Lot the choice of the land.

Being the opportunist that he was, Lot chose what seemed to be the best of the land.

Genesis 13:8–11 (ESV) 8 Then Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen.

This is the heart of a godly man. Not a perfect man, but a godly man who is devoted now to God's will and he fully trusts God's direction.

9 Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. 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."

10 And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar. (This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) 11 So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other.

Can we at those times of strife allow the selfish one to take what appears to be the best or do we contend and fight until there is stark division and hostility?

But then there is a deeper trial than conflict with others—it is the long, silent trial of waiting on God.

IV. The trial of the Patience of his Faith

Genesis 17:1–2 (ESV) 1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, 2 that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.”

He has waited, he has failed, he has wanted and finally resolved that God’s promise was not what he had understood.

In this context God is commanding Abram, stop vacillating, be whole, complete, trust me with unwavering certainty.

Abram is now 99 years old, Sarai is 90.

By this time in his life, there is no physical possibility that this would happen so, Abraham offers up his son Ishmael to the Lord.

Gen. 17: 18 And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!”

He has waited and hoped, but the promised son has not materialized.

God has failed to meet Abram’s expectations. But Abram no longer doubts, he just offers another solution, one that seems more logical and less improbable to his human perspective.

Let Ishmael live in that place of honor!

God said no but through Sarai He would bring about kings and leaders. And in that promise God gave to Abram three things.

A new covenant - circumcision the outward mark that inward there was complete trust in God.

A new name - from Abram ‘exalted father’ to Abraham ‘father of a multitude’

A new wife - Sarai ‘princess’ becomes Sarah ‘noble woman’ the mother of kings.

God delays His promise, He waits for the exact time and moment because God’s opportunity does not arrive until man’s limit has been reached.

And when God finally gives what He promised,

He often asks the question we never expect:

“Will you trust Me with the gift as fully as you trusted Me in the waiting?”

V. The Proof: Abraham’s Greatest Test

This is not the test of faith’s beginning.

This is the proof of faith’s maturity.

This is not about whether Abraham believes God—this is about whether Abraham loves God more than the promise.

The promise has finally come, Isaac has been born and has now lived about 13 years.

Abraham is face to face with the final test, the greatest of all the tests, the proof of whether he walks before the Lord blameless.

"Take Isaac to the land of Moriah, offer him as a burnt offering on a mountain which I shall tell you."

What does Abraham do? He immediately without hesitation tells his young men, and Isaac that they are going to worship the Lord in a special place.

He cuts the wood, prepares the fire and for three days journeys to a mountain that God would reveal to him at the right time.

Let's pick up the story after he and Isaac have left the young men behind.

Genesis 22:7–10 (ESV) 7 And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" 8 Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

Abraham didn't yet know how true those words were.

He spoke better theology than he understood.

Because he was walking toward a mountain where God would indeed provide a Son.

9 When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

10 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.

And heaven stopped Abraham's hand. But there would come another day...on that same ridge...when heaven would not stop.

God spared Abraham's son, but God did not spare His own.

Mt. Moriah was a mountain ridge that ran from Jerusalem into the northern wilderness. It was used by Rome to crucify prisoners, insurrectionists, murders and thieves.

If you had lived in the days of Jesus, and you were walking the road that ran parallel to that ridge, you would see piles of cross pieces, the top of the cross, lying next to old tree stumps that were about 6-7 feet high.

It was there that Jesus would tell His disciples, "pick up your cross daily and follow me."

What Abraham could not see, God already had planned.

The mountain of provision would become the mountain of sacrifice.

The wood carried by Isaac would point to the wood carried by Christ.

Conclusion

Moriah means, ‘The Lord will provide.’

And on that ridge, God did not provide a ram—He provided redemption.

Abraham was asked to give his only son whom he loved.

God gave His only Son whom He loved—this time, Jesus was the substitute. And Christ hung where Isaac never did.

Faith was tested in Abraham but fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

And tonight, the question is not whether God has proven Himself—the question is whether we will trust Him fully, finally, and forever?

What does the testing of your faith prove lives in you?