

EL SHADDAI

God Almighty — Powerful in the Promise, Present in the Process

Monday: Thirteen Years of Tuesday

SCRIPTURE READING: Genesis 16:16–17:1; Psalm 13:1–2 (NIV)

"Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael. When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless.' " ... "How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?"

DEVOTIONAL REFLECTION

Sunday we looked at the white space between two verses. Abram is eighty-six at the end of one chapter and ninety-nine at the start of the next. Thirteen years disappear into a page break.

It takes you a second to read. It took him nearly five thousand days to live.

And here is what I keep coming back to: those years were almost certainly ordinary. There is no famine recorded, no war, no crisis. Just a man raising a son, managing a household, moving livestock, going to bed, waking up, doing it again. If you had asked Abram in year seven how his walk with God was, he might have said fine. Nothing was wrong. Nothing was moving either.

That is the kind of middle most of us are actually in. Not a valley, but a plateau. And a plateau does something a crisis does not. A crisis drives you to your knees. A plateau just slowly reduces what you expect.

Watch how the reduction works. At first you pray with confidence. Then you pray with questions. Then you pray because you know you should. Then you stop bringing it up, because saying it out loud one more time feels worse than letting it go quiet. Nobody announces they have stopped believing. You just quietly renegotiate downward and call it maturity.

Now read Psalm 13 again, because David does something we usually do not. He asks "how long" four times in two verses. Four times. That is not politeness, and it is not a sanitized prayer you would read at a church luncheon. That is a man complaining to God's face.

And God put it in the Bible.

Which tells you something important: the danger in a long middle is not that you get angry with God. The danger is that you go quiet. David is still in the conversation. He is frustrated, confused, and unmistakably still talking. Most of us in year thirteen are not shaking our fists. We are just no longer mentioning it.

So before you ask God to change anything this week, start here. Not with resolve. With honesty. What did you used to pray about specifically that has quietly dropped off the list?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What did I once pray for by name that I have stopped bringing up to God?
- If I mapped the last five years of my life, where is the white space — the stretch where nothing seemed to move?
- Have I been honest with God about the waiting, or have I just gone silent about it and called that peace?

- What have I "adjusted to" that I once genuinely believed God would change?
- Am I more like David in Psalm 13, still asking — or like someone who quit asking to avoid being disappointed again?

PRAYER

Father, I did not stop believing in you. I just stopped expecting anything in particular. Somewhere in the long middle I quietly lowered what I ask for, and I called it being realistic. Today I want to be honest instead. You are not fragile and you are not far. Give me the courage to bring the thing back up, the one I stopped mentioning — and to keep talking to you about it even if nothing changes this week. Amen.

TODAY'S PRACTICE

Write down one thing you used to pray about specifically and no longer do. Beside it, write roughly when you stopped. Then pray about it once today, out loud, with the same specificity you used the first time. You are not manufacturing faith. You are reopening a conversation.

Tuesday: The Plan That Made Sense

SCRIPTURE READING: Genesis 16:1–4; Genesis 3:17 (NIV)

"Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children... so she said to Abram, 'The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her.' Abram agreed to what Sarai said." ... "To Adam he said, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you...'"

DEVOTIONAL REFLECTION

There is a detail in Genesis 16 that is easy to walk past in English. The Hebrew of verse 2 says, literally, that Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.

That exact construction shows up one other place in the story to this point. Genesis 3:17, in the garden, when God says to Adam: because you listened to the voice of your wife.

Moses is not making a point about wives. He is pointing at a pattern. In both scenes, a person in a genuinely difficult predicament takes a reasonable-looking shortcut around what God said — and the shortcut produces consequences that outlive everyone involved.

That is what an Ishmael is. Not a rebellion. A solution.

And this is why naming one is so hard. If your workaround were obviously sinful, you would have dealt with it by now. Most of ours are not. Most of ours are defensible. The job was a good job. The relationship was not scandalous. The decision was practical, and any reasonable friend would have advised it. The plan itself may not even be wrong.

The problem is what we asked it to carry.

We took something human and handed it a promise only God can fulfill. We asked a career to make us matter. We asked a person to make us secure. We asked a plan to guarantee an outcome. And then — because we have now invested years and money and identity in it — we defend it. Not because we think it is right, but because admitting it was a workaround feels like admitting we wasted the time.

Notice something else about that garden echo, though. God does not open with the accusation. He opens with a question: where are you? He goes looking for the people who took the shortcut before he ever addresses the shortcut itself.

He does the same thing here. Thirteen years after Ishmael, the first word out of God's mouth to Abram is not a rebuke. It is a name. His own.

So you can afford to be honest today. Naming your Ishmael is not walking into an ambush. It is answering a God who came looking for you.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What plan in my life am I asking to carry a promise only God can fulfill?
- What would I actually lose if I admitted it was a workaround — time, money, pride, an identity I have built?
- Where have I listened to the voice of what made sense instead of what God said?
- If someone close to me questioned it, how fast would I get defensive? What does that reaction tell me?
- What have I been asking God to bless that he may be asking me to release?

PRAYER

God, I built something while I was waiting on you, and I have spent a long time defending it instead of admitting it. Thank you that you come looking before you correct. I am not going to pretend today. Show me what I have asked to carry weight that belongs to you alone. Give me the honesty to name it plainly and the trust to believe you are not standing over me with an accusation. Amen.

TODAY'S PRACTICE

Finish this sentence in writing: "The plan I built while I was waiting is _____. " Be specific enough that it would be uncomfortable if someone read it. Then say it out loud to God. Do not fix it today, and do not make a decision about it. Just stop calling it something else.

Wednesday: Almighty in the Middle

SCRIPTURE READING: Genesis 17:1; 2 Corinthians 12:8–9 (NIV)

"I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless." ... "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"

DEVOTIONAL REFLECTION

Pay attention to when God says this name.

Not at seventy-five, when Abram was strong and the promise was fresh. Not in the delivery room a year later, holding the proof. He says it at ninety-nine, in the silence, after the failure, with nothing on the ground to show for any of it.

El Shaddai is not the name God reveals at the finish line. It is the name he speaks in the middle.

And that changes what we do with our limitations. Because most of us have quietly assumed that our limitation is the thing standing between us and whatever God wants to do with our lives. If I were younger. If I were healthier. If I had not wasted those years. If I had more margin, more money, more education, more discipline. We treat the limitation as the obstacle God needs us to clear before the real work can start.

But look at what God actually did. He never made Abraham young again. The body stayed ninety-nine. The womb stayed empty. God did not remove the limitation, he worked straight through it, on purpose, so that nobody could ever confuse his promise with Abraham's ability.

Now put that next to Paul.

Paul had something he calls a thorn. We do not know what it was, and that is probably mercy — it lets everyone read themselves into it. He begged God three times to take it away. Three times is not a casual request. That is the same number of times Jesus prayed in Gethsemane.

And God said no.

But listen to how he said no: my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Not "I will get you out." Not "hold on until this is over." Something better and much harder, I am enough in here, and the place you are weakest is the place my strength will be most visible.

That is exactly what El Shaddai meant in a tent when a man was ninety-nine.

Be careful what you do with that, though. This is not a guarantee that every diagnosis reverses, every relationship is restored, or every door eventually opens. God has not promised us every outcome we can imagine. He has promised that no circumstance gets a vote over his purpose, and that he will not leave us alone in the meantime.

So here is the honest question for the middle you are in. Are you waiting for God to remove the limitation before you will believe he is working? Or is it possible that the thing you keep calling a roadblock is the road?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What limitation have I been treating as the obstacle to God's work in me?
- What have I asked God more than once to simply take away?
- If he does not remove it, what would it look like for his strength to be visible through it instead?
- Where have I assumed that delay means nothing is happening?

- Do I want the breakthrough more than I want God himself? What is my honest answer, not my Sunday answer?

PRAYER

Almighty God, I have been waiting for you to fix the thing before I would trust you in the thing. You did not make Abraham young. You did not remove Paul's thorn. And you were not failing either of them. Teach me to stop treating my weakness as the reason you cannot work, and let it become the place your power is obvious. Be enough in here, not just on the other side. Amen.

TODAY'S PRACTICE

Name the limitation you have most asked God to remove, a health issue, a circumstance, a season, a weakness in yourself. Then pray one sentence: "If you do not remove it, be enough in it." Notice what that costs you to say honestly. Sit with that for a minute before you move on.

Thursday: The Name He Gives You

SCRIPTURE READING: John 21:9, 15–17; Revelation 2:17 (NIV)

"When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread." ... "Simon son of John, do you love me?" ... "To the one who is victorious, I will give... a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it."

DEVOTIONAL REFLECTION

God gave Abraham a name that was only true if God came through. Father of a multitude, spoken over a man with one son and two failing bodies. The name did not describe his present. It announced God's future.

Everything about that points forward to Jesus.

Jesus is not a teacher who talked about God from a distance. He is God who put on skin and stepped into our story. Fully God and fully man. He walked into our silence, carried our sin into death — all the way in and all the way down, and on the third day walked out alive. The same Almighty who brought life out of Sarah's dead womb brought resurrection out of a sealed tomb. He does not merely improve hard stories. He rewrites dead ones.

And then he does something with names.

John records a small detail on the beach that almost nobody notices. He says there was a fire of burning coals. The Greek word is unusual, it appears only twice in the entire New Testament. The other time is in John 18, in the courtyard, where Peter warmed his hands and denied he ever knew Jesus. Three times.

So the risen Jesus builds a charcoal fire on a beach and cooks breakfast. Peter walks up and smells the exact thing he smelled on the worst night of his life.

And Jesus asks him one question. Three times.

He does not rename him Coward. He does not rename him Failure. He had already named this man Rock, and Peter had just crumbled in public, and Jesus keeps the name and hands him a flock. Feed my sheep. Three denials answered by three commissions, standing in the smell of his own worst moment.

That is what the Almighty does with a dead-end chapter.

And at the very end of the Bible, Jesus promises a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it. There is mystery in that image, but the message is not mysterious at all. Your deepest identity is not assigned by your past, your pain, your failure, or the crowd. It is handed to you by Jesus.

The world names you by what happened. Jesus names you by what his grace is doing.

He does not rename you to flatter you. He names you for a destiny, and destiny here does not mean a platform, a title, or a painless life. It means you belong to him, you are being made like him, and not even death can keep you from the future he has promised.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What name did my past give me — and do I still answer to it?
- Where do I relate to Jesus as someone who improves my story rather than someone who rewrites it?
- Peter got asked the same question three times. What question does Jesus keep bringing back to me?
- If I actually believed I am forgiven, cherished, a son or daughter, beloved, and his, "what would look different by Sunday?"

– What would it cost me to stop introducing myself by my worst chapter?

PRAYER

Jesus, you did not manage my rescue from a distance. You came into it, you carried my sin into death, and you walked out of the grave alive. Thank you that you meet failures on beaches and hand them back their names. I have been answering to what shame called me for a long time. Today I want to answer to you. Name me, and help me live like it is true before I feel it. Amen.

TODAY'S PRACTICE

Take an index card. On one side write the name your past gave you, the actual word, not a softened version. On the other side write: forgiven, cherished, son or daughter, beloved, his. Carry it today. Every time you catch yourself answering to the first side, physically turn the card over.

Friday: Walk Before Me

SCRIPTURE READING: Genesis 17:1; Psalm 86:11 (NIV)

"I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless." ... "Teach me your way, LORD, that I may rely on your faithfulness; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name."

DEVOTIONAL REFLECTION

The name and the call arrive in the same sentence. I am God Almighty, now walk before me and be blameless.

And blameless does not mean flawless. The word carries the sense of being whole. Undivided. All of one piece. God is not demanding a perfect performance from a ninety-nine-year-old man. He is asking for an undivided heart — which means you do not need an Ishmael in one hand while you hold God's promise in the other. You do not need a public faith and a private escape plan. You do not need to follow God with one hand still on the steering wheel.

Now notice how David goes after that same thing in Psalm 86. He does not say, "I will produce an undivided heart." He says, "give me an undivided heart."

That is worth sitting with. Wholeness is requested, not manufactured. Which means today is not about gritting your teeth into integrity. It is about asking God for something you cannot generate on your own — and then doing the next faithful thing while he does it.

And the next faithful thing is usually not new information.

We want a fresh word. A new insight. A podcast that finally unlocks it. But most of us are not short on knowledge. We are short on obedience to what we already know. There is something God has already made clear to you, a conversation to have, an apology to offer, a habit to end, a person to forgive, a generosity to begin, and you have been waiting for clarity that already came.

Do that thing. Not because the process makes sense, but because El Shaddai is present in it.

One more thing before the week ends. Abram was not alone in those thirteen years — he had a household, a wife, a growing son. And God had not gone anywhere; silence is not absence. But read the chapters again and notice what Scripture never mentions. Not one person is recorded walking with him in the waiting. Nobody asks how he is holding up. Nobody carries the promise with him.

Somebody in your life is in year thirteen right now. They are not in crisis, so nobody is calling. The grief is old enough that everyone assumes they are fine. The couple is still waiting and stopped announcing it. The friend quit mentioning the thing and everybody let it drop.

You know who it is. You have known since you started reading this paragraph. God is present in the process, and this week, he would like to be present through you.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Where do I still have one hand on the steering wheel while calling it faith?
- What is the one thing God has already made clear that I have not yet obeyed?
- What does the next faithful thing look like this week — specifically, not in general?
- Who do I know in a long middle that nobody is checking on, precisely because they are not in crisis?
- What would actually be different about my Monday if I believed El Shaddai was present in the process?

PRAYER

Lord, give me an undivided heart. I cannot manufacture that, so I am asking. Take back the hand I have kept on the wheel. Show me the one thing you have already made clear that I have been circling instead of obeying, and give me the courage to do it this week. And use me for somebody else in the middle — let me be the presence nobody has offered them. Amen.

TODAY'S PRACTICE

Two things. First, pray Psalm 86:11 as your own words: "Give me an undivided heart." Second, write down one name — the person in a long middle nobody is checking on — and reach out today. No advice, no fixing, no verse. "I have been thinking about you, and I know it is still hard" is enough. Then keep saying their name to God for the next month.