



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: A Vibrant Faith: Genesis 12-25 wk. 2

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Lately, I've been reading some books on how to break and train a horse and it's been interesting how much of that has a parallel to just life. Whether you're talking about learning to ride a bicycle, whether you're talking about starting a business, whether you're talking about making a career change, whether you're talking about going to college or entering into a relationship, at some point you have to put your foot in the stirrup and decide I'm going to ride. Because if you linger too long in kind of that gray area of indecisiveness, that's typically where the wreck's going to happen. So, you make up your mind. You're either going to do it or you're not.

That's certainly true in our relationship with God as it relates to this whole journey of faith. Sometimes we have the best of intentions and we put our foot in the stirrup and we say, okay, we're going to do it. And we start to climb on this horse. And about halfway on we lose our nerve and we start to doubt. And we start to think, well, I'm not sure, and we're, we're kind of going to ride, but we're not going to ride. And, and that's typically where the crash occurs.

We've been tracking the life of Abram for about 23 years now in terms of his life. He has made a couple of unfortunate decisions, bad choices, but for the most part, he really has lived a remarkable life of faith. He has chosen to believe that God tells the truth and he's acted on that belief. And at the center of all of that is this promise that God has made, that he would give Abram a son, a promised seed. And through that seed, all of the families of the earth would be blessed. And we understand that ultimately that promised seed is Jesus himself. And so now for 23 years, Abram and Sarai have been waiting for that child.

They waited 10 years and finally made a disastrous choice and had a child through Hagar, and now God has revisited them and told them to wait, and now they've waited another 13 years and one can only imagine what that would be like waiting year after year after year after year, and there's no child. As a matter of fact, it reached the point where no longer was it a concern that their biological clock was ticking because it had ticked out. According to the New Testament writers, they said that when Abram and Sarai had reached this point in their life, they were as good as dead in their ability now to have children. Meaning it had now gone to a virtual impossibility from a human standpoint that they could ever have this seed of promise. It was now completely impossible, and that's where we pick up the story in Genesis chapter 17.

Verse one, *"Now, when Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, I am God Almighty."* It had been 13 years as far as we know, since God had spoken to Abram and Abram had faithfully waited, believing that God tells the truth, He would bring this promise seed. Even now, from a human standpoint, it was totally impossible. And so, God appears to him and says, I am El Shaddai. I am God Almighty. It's a big, big name for God. It's a name that's used often in the Old Testament, but this is the first time that it's ever used in the scriptures. And it's when God appears to Abraham and says, I am

El Shaddai. I am the mighty God. I'm the God of the universe. I am the God of unlimited power. I am the God of the impossible. And what He's saying to Abram is, Abram trust me. I can do this.

Let's imagine that I owed a debt of \$1 million and I had no way to pay this. And there was a 10-year-old child that got word of this and this 10-year-old-child came to me and said, you know, I've heard you owe \$1 million. And I feel really bad badly about that and so I get 50 cents a month from my dad for allowance, so I'm going to pay off your debt. He could be completely sincere. He may mean that promise with all his heart, but he does not have the capacity to fulfill that promise. He just doesn't. Now, that'd be different than if Bill Gates came and said, I understand you owe \$1 million and I have that much in petty cash and I'm going to pay off your debt. He does have the capacity to follow through on that. When God came to Abram, He said, I am El Shaddai. I am the God of the universe. I can do this.

Have you ever thought about all of the promises of God? Everything that we stake our lives on, everything that we believe both now and for eternity, really have to do with the impossible. They really do. If He is not El Shaddai, we're done. So, He says, trust Me, I am God. I can do this, but right after He introduces himself as El Shaddai, He follows that with a statement that says, because of who I am, this is how I expect you to live in covenant relationship with Me. *"I am God Almighty, walk before Me and be blameless, walk before Me and be blameless."*

I love the terminology. Walk implies this is a way of life. This is a journey. This was a relationship. It's not Abram, this is what I need you to do this hour, but this is how I expect us to live together in relationship. It's very important to understand what God was NOT saying. What God was not saying is that Abram had to do this in order for God to fulfill His promise. Abram wasn't doing that to somehow earn or deserve or merit this covenant. God had made that very clear in chapter 15. Abram, this is all Me. This is all Me. It's a unilateral covenant and I'm going to shed my blood for your failure to keep the covenant and so Abram just entered into the covenant by faith. What God is saying though is that when you by faith, choose to enter into this covenant with Me, there are certain expectations that go with that covenant relationship. There's, there's a certain way than I expect you to live in relationship with Me.

One of the best ways to understand that would be to think about marriage. The Bible presents marriage as a picture. It's a picture of a covenant relationship, it's a picture of the covenant relationship we have with God. Now, I understood on that day, nearly 21 years ago when I stood at the altar and I said, I do, I was not saying I do for this hour. I was not saying I do today. What was implied in those two words was 'I do now for the rest of my life', that I am saying that I'm entering into a covenant relationship and it will radically change the way I live the rest of my life.

Can you imagine what it'd be like to stand at the altar and say, 'I do' and change nothing? So, I get married, I receive a marriage license and I just go on dating other girls. I don't think that would go over very well at home. Somebody would say, I thought you got married! Well, I do, I have a marriage license, but I haven't changed anything. That I just continue to live in my house and do my own thing and people say, I thought you got married. Oh, I do. I have a marriage license, but nothing's changed - that doesn't make a whole lot of sense. I understood that when I stood at that altar I was saying I do, and what was implied in that is I'm entering into a covenant love relationship and I will spend the rest of my life pouring my life into this person and she into me and we will go on this wonderful journey of love and intimacy together. That's all implied in that covenant.

There are a lot of people that heard a presentation of the Gospel and they'd rather go to heaven than to hell. So, they said, yes, I believe, and that's all there is to it. It's like they've obtained a marriage license, but they've never really entered into the covenant relationship with God.

Have you ever noticed that nowhere in the Bible does it present the Gospel in the neat little summary nutshell that we like to present? In other words, if you go out here to the track rack and you pull out a track, you can't find one track that presents the gospel just out of one text of scripture. They pull from this book and this book and this book and this book, and we bring it all together in this summary and we call that the gospel. But you do have to wrestle with the question, if God wanted it packaged that way, why didn't He? When you stop and think about the fact that these letters went to different cities and they didn't really come together into one book until generations had come and gone. If that's what God wanted, why didn't he package it that way in every single letter that went out, so nobody missed it?

Well maybe it's because of exactly what he's talking about here in Genesis chapter 17, is because God wants people to enter into a dating relationship and then an engagement so that when they stand at that altar of faith and they say I do, they understand what they're committing to. They understand that God wants them to know who He is, that he is El Shaddai, that he is God and God wants them to understand who we are, that we're sinners in need of a Savior and all the dynamics of them. And He wants them to understand what He has done for us on the cross, shedding His blood so that we can enter into this covenant relationship so that when we stand there and say, I do, we understand this isn't just a ticket to heaven. This is entering into a lifelong covenant, love relationship with God. And because he is God Almighty, then we walk before him in obedience.

I know there are some people that would define the gospel as kind of that summary statement, for, you know, two, three, four things we bring together. And that's the gospel. And they would go so far as to say, you know, if the preacher doesn't give that little summary statement, he hasn't preached the Gospel. I completely disagree with that. Every time you open this book and proclaim it, that's the gospel. As a matter of fact, that's exactly how the New Testament defines it. It's the good news from Genesis to Revelation. It's the big picture of God in His Holiness and us in our sinfulness and what God did in order to bring us together in a covenant relationship.

Well, that's what God is establishing in verse one, *"I am El Shaddai, walk before me and be blameless and I will establish my covenant between me, and you and I will multiply you exceedingly. And Abram fell on his face and God talked with him saying, as for Me, behold My covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be called Abraham. For I will make you the father of a multitude of nations and I will make you exceedingly fruitful and I will make nations of you and kings shall come forth from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you, throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you and your descendants after you the land of your sojourning's, and all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."*

This is not God establishing a new covenant. This is simply God reaffirming the covenant of Genesis 15. As a part of that covenant, God says to Abram, I'm going to change your name. The name Abram means Exalted Father or could be translated Father of Many. But now it's going to be changed to Abraham, which means Father of a Multitude of Nations.

Have you ever thought about what that must have been like when Abram announced his name change? Donald Grey Barnhouse really talks about what it must've been like for Abram before the birth of Ishmael and then what it must have been like when he announced his name change. Listen to what he has to say:

Abram was his name in its earlier form and the name Abram means father of many. But the key to the story is that this man, even though he had a name like that, was the father of none.

Abram was strategically located on the roads of the camel caravans that carried the commerce of the ancient world between Egypt and the north and the east. He owned the wells and his flocks and herds were great. When the caravans of the rich merchants came into the land, either from the north or from the south, they stopped at Abram's wells. The servants of Abram took good care of the needs of the camels and the servants of the traders. Food was sold to the travelers and in the evening time, the merchants would have come to Abram's tent to pay their respects.

The questions would have followed a set pattern. "How old are you? How are you? How long have you been here?" When the trader had introduced himself, Abram was forced to name himself Abram, Father of Many. It must have happened a hundred times, maybe a thousand times, and each time, more galling than the time before. "Oh, father of many. Congratulations. How many sons do you have?" And the answer was so humiliating to Abram. "None." And many a time there must have been a half-concealed snort of humor at the incongruity of the name and the fact that there were no children born to backup such a name. Abram must've steeled himself for the question and the reply and hated the situation with great bitterness.

Now, when the travelers came to the wells to camp and to call upon Abram, the question of the name was not quite as difficult as before. What is your name? Abram. Father of many. Oh, congratulations. How many sons do you have? I have one. Speaking of Ishmael. True, it was not very many, but it was enough to keep the smirk off their faces and winks from the glances of the servants who stood nearby. Abram had a son. He was a man.

There are some things in the Bible that cause me to chuckle, and there was a thought in connection with this verse that always has had that effect on me. I cannot help but think of what must have happened when Abra-ham broke the news to his family and servants that he was now changing his name. They all knew that his former name was Abram, father of many, and they knew it had been somewhat of a thorn to him. So, we can imagine the stir of interest and curiosity when he announced, "I'm going to change my name." Were there some who said to themselves with a laugh, "The old man couldn't take it. It got under his skin after all, to be the father of nobody for 86 years, and then to be the father of only one with a name like that, father of many, it must have had its rough moments. So, he's going to change his name. I wonder what it'll be?"

And then the old man spoke. "I am to be known as Abraham, Father of a Multitude." We can almost hear the silence of the stunned moment as the truth breaks upon them, father of a multitude? Then the laughter broke forth behind the scenes. The old man has gone crazy. He had one child when he was 86 and now at 99, he's beginning to get ideas. Father of a multitude? Was there ever anything more ridiculous for a man his age?

Now, obviously Barnhouse is just speculating, but there had to have been those kinds of dynamics, as Abram said, I'm going from Father of Many to Father of a Multitude of nations.

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Cara: Bryan, thanks for helping us picture what it meant for Abraham to have faith.

Bryan: Yeah. So, Abraham believed and there's all kinds of implications to that. And uh, that led to action as we've talked about. It wasn't just an intellectual ascent, but it actually was a belief that would define the pathway of his life.

Cara: It's really hard to imagine what it must have been like for Abram to wait on God and keep believing we forget how silly that must've seemed to others around him.

Bryan: Yeah. So, we've talked about this before, but I think we forget how much time passes in these passages and how many years they waited and they were aging. From all human, uh, standards, they were far beyond the ability to have a child. So, you think about just must have seemed so ridiculous, so naive, so laughable to the people around them. It's a little bit like Noah and we talked about everybody laughing at Noah. It had to have been the same with Abraham and Sarai.

Arnie: So, what's the relationship between faith and obedience?

Bryan: Yeah, so I would say obedience is the evidence of faith. So, I believe it, and I believe it to such a degree, I actually live like it. So, the obedience is the outflow. If I doubt, I don't think God tells the truth, then I'm likely not going to disobey. We've, we've talked about temptation is the invitation to meet a legitimate need through illegitimate means. So, if I don't think God can be trusted to meet my need, I'll do it my way. That's disobedience. If I trust Him, then all obey Him. I think part of that process though is I just need to believe enough to take a step. The try. And then sometimes in my experience, I find God faithful, so I believe a little more. And then I obey. So, it's like a process where God keeps showing himself faithful and I keep growing in my belief. So, it is a process.

Cara: So, God commanded Abraham to walk with him and be blameless. Uh, what does that word mean now? Blameless. How can we do that?

Bryan: Yeah, so great question. So, it doesn't mean that he was saved by works. So, Paul in Romans 4 makes that abundantly clear "by faith". So, Abraham believed it was reckoned to him as righteousness, but it's the reminder that this was a covenant relationship, and that comes with expectations. Probably the best illustration is marriage. When I stand at the altar and enter into a covenant relationship with my wife, there's expectations that come with that. I'm not going to turn around and keep dating. You know? You don't have to say that in a wedding. I think it's understood. So, in this case, it's Abraham enters into this covenant relationship, but God expects him now to live accordingly.