



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: By Faith We Live: Genesis 12-25 wk. 3

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Remember those days back when you were in school. For some of us, it's been quite a while. Remember those days when you got back that test or that paper and it had on it a big red "F". And you get that sick feeling in your stomach. Nobody likes to be told that they've just failed. And it would be one thing if failure was limited to biology and math and English, but quickly we learn that failure is a part of life. The reality is nobody's probably given you a report card with a letter grade on it, but you feel it just the same.

For some of you, you feel that sense of failure as it relates to a marriage. Some of you feel it as a parent. Some of you feel it in other relationships. Some of you with your job or your career or your schooling. We're going to have a whole long list of areas where you've felt that sting of failure. It's very real. Maybe the ultimate report card would be when God gives us a report card and on it is a big red "F". The reality is, as Christians, sometimes we fail.

One of the things that I really love about the Bible is it's so authentic. Some people say the Bible is just a book full of fables and legends, but when you record fables and legends, your heroes are always bigger than life. That's not the way the Bible is recorded. It's real. It's authentic. The heroes of faith are presented warts and all. Take for example, Peter, in the New Testament, Peter without question was a dynamic hero of the faith, leader of the New Testament church, but we don't have to read too far in the gospels before we also see that Peter had his moments of failure. Which raises an interesting question, why? Why do the writers of scripture under the inspiration of the spirit of God record both the victories and the failures of God's people? Is that so we can identify with their failures and we can kind of excuse our own blunders? No, I don't think that's it at all. I think one reason is because it gives us a realistic view of this journey of faith. If all that was recorded were the great victories, we'd have an unrealistic view of the Christian walk.

But I think another reason is because it reveals to us how God responds when we fail. Imagine if all the stories in the Bible were stories of victory, I would have no idea - how does God respond when I fail and what I would tend to think is He probably responds like everybody else around me when I fail, which would create a very warped view of God because the fact is, He doesn't respond like everybody else at all.

Abraham and Sarah are without question, heroes of faith, really a remarkable journey of faith. But they have had their moments of failure. Genesis 12, the famine hit the land and they didn't trust God and they headed into Egypt. All kinds of problems there. Genesis 16 they come up with a plan. Maybe the promised seed can come through Sarah's slave girl Hagar, and they create all kinds of problems there.

But we would have to say these last several chapters, Abraham and Sarah, they're on a roll, they're on a major faith role.

Chapter 17 is a beautiful chapter that records Abraham's willingness to take the sign of the covenant as his way of saying, God, I absolutely believe that you tell the truth. I believe by faith. I'm going to go with this thing. Chapter 18 is such an intimate picture of Abraham literally dining with God as one would dine with a friend. And while at the table God says to Abraham, I'm the God for whom nothing is too difficult. He goes on to say that, I know you've been waiting for this promise seed for 25 years, but we're going to set a due date. It's going to be one year from today and Sarah's going to have that child. So no longer are they just kind of waiting and hoping, but they have a due date. It's coming and they know when it is.

You get into Chapter 19 and Abraham stands on a hillside and he look down into the valley and he sees the, the raw power of God as His wrath is poured out and Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities of the valley are destroyed. It's really an awesome display of God's power and he must have gone back and just really, uh, once again, uh, renewed this covenant relationship with God and, and what it means to walk by faith and been thankful for what he has with God. You would think at this point he would be so strong in his faith. That's why what happens in chapter 20 just knocks the wind out of us. It is so completely unexpected. And in the process, we get a beautiful picture of how God responds when His people of faith fail.

If you have a Bible turn to Genesis chapter 20, verse one. "*Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev and settled between Kadesh and Shur. Then he's sojourned in Gerar.*" Abraham is on the move, which is not unusual. He was a pilgrim. He was a sojourner. He was kind of a nomad. They traveled around the land because they really did not have a place that they were calling home yet. If you read Hebrews Chapter 11 where Abraham and Sarah are clearly identified as heroes of the faith - as a matter of fact - we often refer to that as the faith hall of fame and if you read chapter 11 you find that Abraham and Sarah get more print than any other Old Testament person of faith. I mean they were really at the top of the heap. And one of the things that says about them is that they were unwilling to settle for the things of this world. They were looking for a better place. By faith they were looking for a city whose builder and architect is God.

When you go back to Genesis chapter 18 you find that Abraham was in a tent, which is a picture of the fact that he had not yet found his home. He was a traveler. He was a sojourner. That's contrasted in Genesis 19 when Lot was in a house, which is a picture that Lot had settled. Lot had said, this is home, this will do. That's why in the New Testament we as believers are called sojourners. We're called aliens and travelers, is because this world is not our home and we're not settling for this world. We're looking for a city whose builder and architect is God and so we're looking for a better place by faith. Abraham is a picture of that, so he's a man on the move.

But it is interesting how it's recorded in the text, "*Now Abraham journeyed from there.*" Where's there? You would expect in the previous paragraph for some description of where there is, but it's just there. There is, there is wherever. When you don't have a home, there is just there and you're going to go there because that's kind of the way his life was. Some think it may have been referring to the valley and Abraham didn't like getting up every morning and sipping his coffee and looking down into the destroyed valley, and so maybe for that reason they moved. We don't really know, but it isn't really unusual in Abraham's circumstance. What we are a little bit concerned about is there's no mention of God here ... God told him to move or God was leading him, which kind of gives us the feeling maybe he's going on his own and maybe there's trouble ahead.

They went to Gerar which was a very wealthy city. It was a trade route where the caravans came through and did business. It was right on the border between Egypt and Canaan. It was also a royal city, meaning that's where the king lived. It was not possible for Abraham to travel anonymously. For one reason, he had such a large group that he traveled with. But also, Abraham would have been well known as a warlord. He had won a significant victory over four kings in the north and you had better believe every one of those kings would have been aware of Abraham and where he was and what he was doing. So, it really wasn't possible just to kind of slip into town.

With all of that, verse two, *"And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, she is my sister, so Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah."*

Did I just read what I thought I read? Did he really say that? If you're using the Yogi Berra Study Bible, there's a footnote that says deja vu all over again! We've been here, haven't we? Genesis chapter 12 he went to Egypt, he did the same thing, but that was 25 years ago in Abraham's life. Think of all he had learned and all he had experienced in these significant steps of faith he had taken. What is he doing? What is he doing? He had just been told personally by God at the dinner table, Sarah's going to have the promise seed one year from now and he turns right around and gives Sarah up to Abimelech!

Think about these great moments of faith that he has experienced. I mean, Abraham on a moment's notice, he took on four enemy kings and he wiped them all out. He had stood on the bank and watch God's wrath poured out upon Sodom and Gomorrah. He'd seen this unimaginable display of God's power and suddenly he's, he's afraid of one king and he fails. He fails miserably.

You know, I've noticed something over the years in my own life and just as I talk with people, that fear isn't based on logic and reason. Fear is an emotional response that reflects a core belief deep down in our hearts. Fear is very exposing as to what's down in our hearts.

Sometimes it's a healthy thing. If there's a rattle snake and I'm about to step on it, and a core belief deep in my heart is that rattlesnake's going to bite me and if it bites me, he could kill me, then I have a healthy fear. But most of the time that's not what we're dealing with. Most of the time we're dealing with issues of faith and we fear because we don't trust God. We have this anxiety because we don't believe God tells the truth. Deep down in our heart there is a pocket that still doesn't believe, still doesn't trust. For whatever reason, Abraham had this area of his heart where he still did not trust God. Even with all he had been through, even with all these great victories he'd experienced, there was a part of his heart that still did not believe that God tells the truth, that God can be counted on in this moment of testing. His fear was greater than his faith and he compromised, he failed.

We don't like to think that way. When we have fear and anxiety, we want to believe that, that fear and anxiety can coexist with faith in our heart, but it doesn't. It doesn't work that way. That fear, that anxiety is really a revelation that there's an area of my heart where I don't trust God. I don't think God tells the truth. I don't think He can be counted on for this. I think fear needs to be taken very seriously for a couple of reasons.

One is because I think it just makes our lives miserable to live in a fearful way, to live full of anxiety. It's just a miserable way to live. But I think it's also very important because of what it teaches the people around us that we influence. Take for example, our role as parents. When I'm going through deep water, when I'm going through a test, a trial and my life is characterized by fear and anxiety, what I've just said

to my children, is children, you need to know I cannot trust God. I don't believe God's going to come through on this one. I don't think He can be counted on in the clutch. You just need to know; I just don't trust God. And you have to believe your kids learn that lesson. In those moments what they need from me is a reassurance, yes, this is going to be hard, but, but God is faithful. God can be trusted. I know God's going to come through. So, what I demonstrate is faith, not fear.

Think about the people you work with, when you're going through deep water and you're characterized by fear and anxiety. What you've just said to them is by the way, God can't be trusted. You just need to know that. I don't think God's going to come through on this one, you just need to be aware of that. That's what we communicate to people we work with and our neighbors and our friends when our lives are characterized by fear, so it needs to be taken very seriously. Fear is revealing some pocket in our heart that says in this area, I just don't trust God. And that's part of this journey of faith. We need to accept that, and we need to grow.

Verse three, "But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him, behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married. Now Abimelech had not come near her, and he said, Lord, wilt Thou slay a nation, even though blameless? Did he not say to me, she is my sister? And she herself said, he is my brother. In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this. Then God said to him in the dream, yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against Me, therefore I did not let you touch her. Now therefore, restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you will live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours. "

God isn't exactly subtle with Abimelech. We would say, God got in Abimelech's face and He said, Abimelech, you're a dead man. That would get your attention. Abimelech responds and says, God, I didn't know what was going, I mean, they said this was his sister. I did this with integrity in my heart. And God says, you know, I know that's true. I know that's true and I'm going to give you a chance to make it right. And if you make it right, then everything's going to be okay.

But I think what flows out of this text is the realization that Abraham and Sarah had nothing to fear. Abimelech was no match for God. Abimelech was nothing. God could have easily handled him. Abraham and Sarah were as safe as they could have been. They had every reason to have faith instead of fear.

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Arnie: Bryan, Abraham had his deja vu moment and repeats a sin he'd learned from earlier. Why do we sometimes keep repeating our mistakes over and over again?

Bryan: Yeah, that's a great question. And honestly this story I think surprises us as readers. We just think Abraham's past that. But you know, different circumstances, different season of life, maybe it was very unexpected. I think sometimes when we get on a roll, we get careless, become a little self-sufficient. So, it's hard to know for sure, but it is a consistent biblical theme that we need to remember. You see it all over both the Old and New Testament and I would take it from that. We must be prone to forgetting. And when we forget, then we end up making the same mistakes again.

Cara: So, what's the relationship then between fear and faith?

Bryan: So, fear is the emotion and it's real and it's powerful and in lots of ways you can't just say, don't feel that. That doesn't really work. So, it has to be countered with the truth. And the truth is going to set us free. So, we keep wrestling with what does God say, and do I believe that. And so that's the faith piece of it. So that's the relationship. So, if people just try to stop the emotion, I don't think they're ever going to get there. So, it's like I'm feeling that. So, I need to rehearse now - what does God say? Who is He? Do I believe that? Do I believe He tells the truth? And when the faith gets greater than the fear, then we experience peace.

Cara: So, to kick it out, you just put that in there, you ask yourself that question over again. Is that how we, we kick it out?

Bryan: I think the key is to understand its truth based. So, you can't stop the emotion. That's never going to get you there. So, what you do is then rehearse what is true. And part of that has to do with knowing the object of my faith. So, the more I know God, just like with human relationships, the more I trust God. What has He said? Do I believe that's true? What does He promise? And it's a process. I mean, Abraham was a long way down the road when some of these stories happened. So, it's a process of learning and growing and changing.

Cara: It's amazing how God not only comes to the rescue again, but also pretty fierce with Abimelech. So, it seems like God is actually very protective of His people.

Bryan: Yeah, He is very protective. He loves His people. And I just wonder what was the long-term impact on Abimelech? I mean, God really gets in his face, but we don't know why. We do see Abimelech again, but what's the long-term effect? Is it possible he came to believe in the God of the Hebrews? Did that get the attention of other kings? Did it prevent something else from happening down the road? It's hard to say. God loves Abraham and God intervened and Abraham should've known God would protect him.

Arnie: You know, Bryan, we do a lot of survey work here and we see this theme worldwide really. And when you ask people that don't attend church, why they don't attend church, one of the top 10 and probably top three answers is, I need to forgive myself before I can attend church. I need to forgive myself. Is that really what's needed?

Bryan: So that's a great question. And let's just say it's a bit delicate because I hear lots of Christians in the church say that. It's very common. And I'm always uncomfortable with that language because we have a tendency of refocusing everything on ourselves. So, like for example, when people read, you need to love my neighbor as myself, what happens all too many times is Christians say, well first then, I need to learn to love myself. It's like, that's not where that's going, but we do that. So, in the same way, it's like I need to forgive myself, I'm uncomfortable with the language. I think the better language is that I need to believe God when He says through Christ, I have been forgiven. So, I think we understand, I don't forgive myself. If I could do that, I would be self-righteous. God forgives me. So, the issue is, do I believe that's true and do I trust Him with that?

So, if you think about forgiving someone else, in essence, I'm releasing that person to God and I'm trusting that God will ultimately sort it out, and that's not my job to do it. So, in a similar way, then if God says He's forgiven me, then I release myself to that. I'm going to believe He tells the truth and move on accordingly. So, I'm not forgiving myself. I'm believing God tells the truth and He says, I'm forgiven.

Arnie: I like that.

Cara: If God is willing to give us a second chance, we need to do the same for others then, is what you're saying. In fact, that's what sets us apart and shows that we're actual Christ followers.

Bryan: Yeah. So, I would say, for sure we need to work toward forgiveness, but the language of giving others a second chance can get complicated depending what the issue is. So if I take my child to a daycare and they molest my child, I can work my way toward forgiveness, but I'm not going to take my child there again, which would kind of be the second chance thing. So there takes some wisdom and discretion in terms of what are the steps we take. I can forgive them, but second chance kind of depends on what it is and what, what the issues are and what would be the best next step.

Cara: And something like that though, can you flip a switch and just forgive or is it more of an ongoing process?

Bryan: I don't think you ever just flip a switch and forgive. I think it's a process - kind of comes in layers. But again, you're releasing that person to God and you're trusting God will work it through. So you have to trust him with that. I just don't want to carry it the rest of my life. I don't want to become angry and bitter and it's not my job to ultimately be the judge. So that's different than reconciliation or even a second chance, depending what the issues are.