

“Abraham: A Life-Long Learner”
Genesis 12-25

1/3/10

9 & 10:45 am

Series, “*Character Counts*”

INTRODUCTION

We live in a day where the *value* of good character is increasingly questioned.

When state or national leaders are caught in sexual compromise or ‘legal’ corruption we often hear that it really doesn’t matter as long as the person is doing their job.

Some of you have felt the squeeze to make the sale even if you have to misrepresent the product a little bit.

Some of you have told the truth and paid the price for maintaining your integrity.

And it can seem that when *character* and *performance* clash, performance is what *really* counts.

So, does *character* matter any more? Or is *performance* king?

Over the next few weeks we are going to explore the lives of three great leaders from the past, and see how they made character count when they were getting squeezed by the real pressures of day-to-day life.

Today we’re going to look at the life of *Abraham*.

Abraham is called the father of our faith and the father of everyone who believes. Throughout the New Testament, he is pointed to as the key example of what it means to trust God.

But if you’ve read his story, you know that Abraham wasn’t born a great, godly person. He was a work-in-progress, just like us. He had to listen and learn; he failed and he learned from his failures; he learned to wait on God, and he refused to give up, even when the learning came hard. And, in the end, he became a man who God points to, telling us we can look to Abraham as an example.

But, rather than simply look at Abraham’s faith, we want to look at a theme that lies beneath it: how Abraham was a *life-long learner*, and how God’s supreme purpose for our lives is best accomplished when we choose to become life-long learners.

OPEN to Genesis 12:1 (**PAGE** 17)

... as we look at Abraham the life-long learner.

When we begin reading, you'll notice Abraham's name is "Abram" and Sarah's name is "Sarai."

It's later in their lives when God changes their names to Abraham and Sarah for a very significant reason. We'll come to that. I mention this so you'll know we're talking about the same people, and if I go between saying "Abram" and "Abraham" you'll know I'm speaking of the same person.

God's Promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-7)

READ Genesis 12:1-7

God's promises: v. 2-3

1. He will make Abraham a great nation (v. 2)
2. He will make Abraham's name great (v. 2)
3. He will make Abraham a blessing (v. 2)
4. He will bear a unique marking as God's man (v. 3)
5. All people on Earth will be blessed through him (v. 3)
6. God will give his descendants a land of their own (v. 7)

And at 75 years of age, Abraham leaves Haran at the Lord's command to go to a land *somewhere*: he didn't know where he was going. God said, "Go!" so he went. That's faith. God says it, I'll do what He says and trust Him as I go. Faith.

If we stopped there, we'd think he had life wired. But, after this adventuresome first step, he learns a very important lesson:

Lesson #1: God's Power Trumps Human Wisdom and Strength (Genesis 12:10-19)

READ Genesis 12:10-13

Abraham's rationale for asking Sarah to claim to be his sister instead of his wife?

v. 11: Sarah was beautiful, so,

v. 12: The Egyptians will desire her for her beauty. Some man wanting her as his wife will kill Abraham so he can take her.

So, v. 13, Abraham concludes that the wise course of action is to have Sarah say that she is his sister, and his life will be spared.

Well, let's **test** Abraham's rationale for this decision:

READ vs. 14-16.

Abraham was right! It *made sense*, didn't it?
Humanly speaking, *yes*. Spiritually speaking, *no*. *Why not?*

Because God had made very clear promises to Abraham:

- He had promised to make him a great nation.
- He had promised to curse those who cursed Abraham.
- He had promised a nation and land to Abraham's children.

Abraham didn't yet have any children. So, he wasn't about to get killed by the Egyptians because God had made a promise.

So, Abraham's thinking wasn't yet *characterized* by believing God's promises when he felt threatened. It was still characterized by the world in which he lived; human wisdom and human strength rule.

But, in v. 17-20 we see that the Lord protected Sarah, she was returned to Abraham and they leave Egypt.

The Lesson: God's power is greater than human wisdom, human strength.

After this lesson, God reminds Abraham of His original promise ...

God's Reminder #1 (Genesis 15:1-6)

READ Genesis 15:1-6

v. 1: "Do not be afraid ..." i.e., "*Trust Me.*"

v. 2-3: Abraham to the LORD: “*What good are all Your blessings? I don’t have a son to leave it to.*”

v. 4-5: The LORD promises him a son.

v. 6: Abraham believes God. He trusts Him, he places his faith in the LORD.

So, now, after stating His original promise a second time, in different language, Abraham understands and believes that God is going to give him a son.

This reminder took place 10 years after the promise was first given. Abraham is now 85 years old.

Abraham is now going to learn a second great lesson:

Lesson #2: God’s Power Trumps Human Wisdom and Weakness (Genesis 16:1-6, 15-16)

READ Genesis 16:1-6, 15-16

1. Sarah’s physical weakness in being unable to conceive a child, contributes to Abraham’s decision.

At this point, they have been waiting more than 10 years since God’s original promise and a lot longer since they have been married.

According to the legal custom of the day, “a barren woman could give her maid to **her husband** as a **wife**, and the child born of that union was regarded as the first wife’s child. If the husband said to the slave-wife’s son, “You are my son,” then he was the adopted son and heir. So Sarai’s suggestion was acceptable according to the customs of that time.” (BKC)

So, Abraham takes Hagar as a wife and surrogate mother to Sarah. She conceives, and Abraham’s son, **Ishmael** is born.

As a result of this decision, Abraham helps create a mess that is still with us today, and in the news almost every day:

Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar, (the son of human weakness) becomes the father of the Arab nations.

Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah, (the son of God’s power) becomes the father of Jacob, who is later renamed by God, “**Israel.**” Today’s nation of **Israel.**

Where did the Arab-Israeli conflict begin? Right here!

Abraham is still thinking according to his culture instead of according to God's promises.

Because God is committed to helping His children become life-long learners, we see next ...

God's Reminder #2 (Genesis 17:1-8, 15-21)

READ Genesis 17:1-8, 15-21

Abraham is now 99 years old. 24 years have passed since God first made His promises. God does something unique this time: He changes *Abram's* name to **Abraham** ('*exalted father*' to "**Father of Nations**") and *Sarai's* name to **Sarah** (there doesn't appear to be a change in *meaning* to her name, "**princess**").

But, the changes in their names will be a day-to-day reminder of God's promise. Every time they say the other's new name, it will be a reminder that within 12 months, they will have a son together.

And within 12 months, as God said, it happened!

God's Promise Fulfilled: A Son is Born! (Genesis 21:1-7)

READ Genesis 21:1-2

Abraham is 100 years old. *25 years after* the first statement of promise, God fulfills His Word.

We might think the story could end at this point, but the most important lesson, the lesson that proves that Abraham has been *an attentive life-long learner*, is yet ahead ...

Lesson #3: God Does Not Contradict Himself (Genesis 22:1ff)

READ Genesis 22:1-12

This time Abraham succeeds!!

What made the difference?

Abraham has experienced the reality that God has the power to keep His Word, even when it seems *absolutely impossible*.

And at this point the Scripture allows us to look into Abraham's mind to see what he was thinking:

Hebrews 11:17-19 “**By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son,¹⁸ even though God had said to him, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’¹⁹ Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead ...”**

Abraham is now thinking like a life-long learner. There's a new situation to face, the most demanding yet, but he has learned that nothing can stop God from fulfilling His promises.

So, his thinking now reflects his belief that God can work in circumstances that Abraham has never encountered before. *And the circumstances don't matter.* So he is now thinking according to God's Word instead of according to the wisdom of his day.

So, if God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac, it must be that God was going to bring him back to life, because God promised that Isaac was the son of promise and the son through whom the promise would be fulfilled!

He did it!

And he continued as a life-long learner through the death of his wife, Sarah, and in finding a wife for his son, Isaac. And Isaac's wife, Rebecca, had a lengthy season of infertility before she bore twin sons ... Abraham's grandsons ... the next generation of promise.

And at 175 years he goes to Heaven, the example of faith to all who will believe ***because*** he was *a life-long learner*. (Genesis 25:7-8)

APPLICATION IDEAS

1. Since God's supreme plan for our lives is to make us more like Jesus, He needs to *continually* transform us. So, *we need* to cultivate the mindset of life-long learners so that we don't grow discouraged, or think there's not much more to learn!

2. Oftentimes the biggest lessons come in our later years, the last decade or two. Abraham was about 115 years old when God told him to sacrifice Isaac, just over 2/3 of his total lifespan.

I rediscovered this week, lying in the back of my brain, a long-term assumption that the older I became, *coupled with* increasing maturity and lessons learned, that life would become easier and easier.

I no longer believe that assumption.

I believe the more mature we become, the more we have to contribute to others and sometimes our greatest contributions are how we go through *the greatest challenges* of our lives.

ILLUSTRATION

Some of you will remember Dave Bassard, a pastor here more than 20 years ago. He battled cancer the past four years and went to be with the Lord Saturday night, December 26. I heard about his passing the next afternoon. The memorial service was yesterday in Castro Valley.

Dave's wife, Cathy, sent the following e-mail early last week, and I'd like to read it to you, because I believe Dave and Cathy are examples of a life-long learners:

“Because you have walked so closely with us on this journey, I wanted to share with you how God's presence upheld us during Dave's final hours on this Earth. I have never experienced such richness in all of my life.

On Christmas morning, he felt too weak to join the family for the opening of gifts. ‘I'll join you next year,’ he said with a smile. Clay took his place in reading the Bible and blessing the family.

In the afternoon, it was so warm that we sat in the sunshine on the balcony off of our room. I read to him the notes our dear church family had written to him on Thanksgiving Sunday.

Later on in the afternoon, he heard our grandson playing the guitar and singing in the living room, so he put on his robe and went to join him. Sherah and Clay picked up guitars and soon the whole family joined in worship. After about an hour of singing, we decided to take Holy Communion together, and finally, Dave went back to bed.

The next morning, I realized that he had become too weak to talk, so I gathered our children and grandchildren to his bedside to tell him how much they loved him. He was able to acknowledge them with his eyes. His mom and sisters joined us and we set up a prayer and praise vigil ~ singing, reading Scripture, praying and reminiscing.

About 10:00 pm, we were sharing with his mother about the testimony he gave at church (CV First) on August 16. She hadn't heard it so we brought in a lap top and began to play it for her. At the very second that Dave (on the recording) began to quote his life verse, Galatians 6:9, he breathed his last breath. We began saying goodbye, and then his recorded voice said, ‘Let me pray for you ...’ and we listened to his sweet dear prayer.

At the moment of His passing, the sky was filled with lightening and thunder, as if Creation was joining God's angels in celebration.

Dave never missed a Sunday due to illness until this December. His greatest joy was to lead God's people in worship, and it energized him to be able to look out over the congregation and watch them joining him in praise.

Now every day will be Sunday for Dave ~ without the pain and sorrows of this life. Now our hearts will long for Heaven all the more, and our worship will be more profound because God has redeemed us with His precious blood and made it possible for us all to join Dave to worship before His throne.

Because He lives,

Cathy

CONCLUSION

When your time comes, will you be remembered as a life-long learner? Someone who continued to trust, continued to get up when you fell, continued to learn to think according to God's Word and not according to society's system?

It's never too late to begin! Abraham was about 115 years old when he finally made the connection.

Why not begin this morning? Choose one thing and start.

"Father in Heaven, I choose today to be a life-long-learner. Thank You for Your willingness to continue to teach me! In Jesus' name, Amen."