

SINNERS & SAINTS
Abraham
Genesis 12–22, Romans 4, and Hebrews 11:17–19
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The Bible hero we're looking at today is Abraham, along with his wife, Sarah. Genesis devotes 14 chapters to Abraham and Sarah's life, and they're mentioned multiple times in the New Testament as well. The New Testament designates Abraham as "The Father of Faith," and the Apostle Paul makes clear in Romans chapter 4 that it's Abraham's faith in God that leads him to be remembered as the Father of Faith for all people—both Jews and Gentiles.

Abraham's faith is legendary. We first meet him in Genesis chapter 12 immediately after the Tower of Babel fiasco, which saw a group of people attempt to construct a tower that would reach to the heavens and make a name for themselves. God stymied their plan by giving them a variety of languages and spreading them across the earth.

Similar to Noah, God spoke to Abram—that was his name when we first meet him—seemingly out of nowhere. Here are God's words to Abram in Genesis 12:1–5:

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

I'd like us to look more closely at what's happening here. God calls Abram and his wife, Sarai, to leave the safety and security of everything they know to go to an unknown place God would show them. God promised to make Abram and Sarai into a great nation, which He would bless, and through them, the entire world would be blessed as well. Following Creation, Adam

and Eve, and the fall in Eden, and after the flood and the tower of Babel, God was starting afresh with Abram and Sarai. (Eventually Abram's name is changed to Abraham and Sarai's to Sarah to indicate that they would be the father and mother of nations. For simplicity's sake, I'm going to refer to them as Abraham and Sarah from now on.) At the time Abraham heard God, Abraham's family was polytheists—meaning they worshiped a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses connected with nature, like the sun god, and the moon god, the god of the mountains, and the god of the rivers. As God revealed Himself to Abraham and later to the Jewish people, He was adamant that He's the only God, not just one among many. Their worship of God alone uniquely identified the Jewish people as monotheists. A solitary God was a radical concept to the people of that era, and it would have been practically inconceivable to Abraham and Sarah, but when God called, Abraham responded and followed God to the place He directed.

In this initial introduction to Abraham, we're told he was 75 years old, and we later learn his wife, Sarah, was 65. Their age may not seem that unusual until we understand God's plan was for Sarah to conceive, deliver, and raise a child in her old age. God called to Abraham, and Abraham took everyone and everything he owned and followed God. Abraham is known as "The Father of Faith," but as we'll see, his faith frequently wavered.

In the course of Abraham's travels, we're told of two times when he so feared for his life that he convinced Sarah to tell anyone they encountered that she and Abraham were siblings. Abraham, knowing Sarah was beautiful, was convinced that if it were known he was Sarah's husband, he would be killed so Sarah could be taken as someone's wife—but if were introduced as her brother, his life might be spared. In chapter 12, Abraham and Sarah used this ruse in Egypt, and later in Genesis chapter 20, we read that they did the same thing in a place called Gerar. In each place, Sarah was taken by the king of the place where they were staying—presumably to become part of the king's harem—and Abraham's life was preserved. In his grace, God intervened in both situations so Sarah wasn't injured, and while the rulers who had been deceived by Abraham were angry, God protected Abraham and Sarah, and they were permitted to leave unharmed.

Abraham's doubt and lack of trust in God's protection may, at first glance, seem odd for the man known as "The Father of Faith," but as we emphasized last week, weakness is the experience of every one of us as humans. The designations "sinner" and "saint" coexist in all of us who have placed our faith in Jesus. In fact, it's precisely because of our frailty that God gains glory through our lives. As the Apostle Paul points out in his second letter to the 1st Century Corinthian church, "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). And Tyler Staton, in his book, "Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools," notes, "To call someone a saint is not to necessarily call them good; it is only to name them as someone who has experienced the goodness of God."

As I emphasized last week and will continue to reiterate throughout this series, we're highlighting the failures, shortcomings, and sins of these Bible heroes not to smear their character but to emphasize that none of us—even the holiest saints—are perfect, and God still uses imperfect people like you and me to accomplish his purposes. To paraphrase Tyler Staton, we're saints not because of our own inherent goodness but because we've experienced the grace and forgiveness and goodness of God. Despite Abraham's faith failures, he is known as the Father of Faith, and in spite of our failures, God can be glorified in our lives, too.

We also see Abraham and Sarah's lack of faith about God's promise to make them parents in their old age. To be fair, Abraham and Sarah were seemingly too old to become parents. They were 75 and 65 years of age when God first spoke to Abraham, and they were 100 and 90 years of age when Isaac, the child of promise, was finally born. Knowing their age, it's easy to understand why it was difficult for them to believe God's promise.

In chapter 15, Abraham and Sarah were having their doubts. God appeared to Abraham in a vision and reaffirmed his promise, but Abraham responded, "Sovereign Lord, what can you give since I remain childless...You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir" (Genesis 15:2–3). In response, God took Abraham outside at night and told him to look at the stars. God said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be" (Genesis 15:5). We're then told that Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.

Time moved on, and Abraham was now 85 years of age, and Sarah was 75. This time, Sarah's faith wavered, and she went to Abraham and suggested that he take her servant girl, Hagar, and conceive a child through her... so they could, you know, help God out. Abraham agreed, and nine months later, Ishmael was born. Aside from attempting to fulfill God's promise in a way other than what God intended, Ishmael's birth created jealousy between Sarah and her servant, and later Ishmael and his people became rivals to God's people, the Israelites.

Four years after Ishmael's birth—Abraham was now 99 and Sarah, 89—there was still no child. God appeared again to Abraham and told him that in a year, he and Sarah would be parents. Abraham fell on his face before God and laughed and said, "Will a son be born to a man one hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety? If only Ishmael might live under the promise?" (Genesis 17:17–18). God promised Abraham that He would bless Ishmael, but Abraham and Sarah were going to have a son. Shortly after this, God sent three heavenly visitors to Abraham and Sarah to tell them they'd have a son within a year, and when Sarah heard this, she laughed inside her tent. The divine beings asked, "Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:13–14). And just as God promised, a year later when Abraham was 100 and Sarah 90, Sarah gave birth to a boy whom they named, Isaac—which means "laughter."

Time passed and Isaac grew—we don't know exactly how old he was, but a good guess would be somewhere between 8 and 12 years of age. Abraham refers to him as "the boy" when talking to his servants, but he was old enough to carry a load of wood for the fire. I'll read from Genesis chapter 22, beginning at verse 1.

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

² Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

³ Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. ⁴ On the third day Abraham

looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵ He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”

⁶ Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, ⁷ Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?”

“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

⁸ Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.

⁹ When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

¹² “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

¹³ Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

¹⁴ So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.”

¹⁵ The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time ¹⁶ and said, “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, ¹⁸ and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”

Admittedly, God's instruction to Abraham to sacrifice his son is disturbing to us. In the culture of that day, child sacrifice was a common religious practice—one that God later strictly forbade his people from engaging in. We can only speculate on the emotions Abraham felt when God gave him this command. Child sacrifice would be unthinkable for any father, but especially because Isaac was the child of promise Abraham and Sarah had waited on God for, for 25 years. Like many of the Old Testament stories, the narrative moves quickly with only minimal details, but we see Abraham was obedient and prepared to sacrifice Isaac up until the point when the angel of the Lord told him to stop. In spite of Isaac being the one through whom God had said He would fulfill the promise of Abraham and Sarah being the father and mother of nations, Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son to God.

The details we're given in Genesis are minimal, but fortunately more of the gaps are filled in for us in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul spends the entire chapter of Romans 4 putting Abraham's faith in God in context for us, and in Hebrews chapter 11, we read these amazing words:

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

God's testing of Abraham appears to have been to solidify for Abraham the understanding that his faith and trust lay in God, not in Isaac as the fulfillment of the promise that he and Sarah would be the father and mother of many nations. His faith had been shaky and uncertain in the past, but in this instance, Abraham fully placed his trust in God. The author of Hebrews goes so far as to say that even if he had sacrificed his son, God could have raised Isaac to life and still fulfilled the promise through him.

The stories of the Old Testament men and women we're exploring throughout this series are fascinating, but I don't want us to stop at being intrigued by their stories. Each week I'd like us to think about the implications the lives of these people have for us and for our lives.

As we reflect on Abraham and Sarah's lives, I want to begin with an insight I believe needs to be reinforced for every one of us about the nature of faith. I'm convinced that because of our doubts and uncertainties, many of us perceive ourselves as lacking in faith. It's important for us to understand that being a person of faith doesn't preclude us from having doubts and taking missteps. Faith, as we see in Abraham's life, is ultimately trusting that God is who He says is and that He will do what He says He'll do despite our doubts, and even at times, our unbelief. Faith isn't the absence of fear or doubt. Faith is pushing ahead in obedience to God in spite of our fears and doubts. The first question I'd like each of us to reflect on is this: **Do I live as a person of faith?** Just as last week I emphasized the importance of viewing ourselves as saints rather than sinners and living up to that high calling, identifying ourselves as a person who lives by faith focuses us on God's power and his promises rather than fixating on our own human frailty and unbelief.

Secondly, as we consider Abraham's story, it appears that God's command to him to sacrifice Isaac was to ensure Abraham's faith was firmly placed in God, not in Isaac or anyone or anything else. **Are there obstacles in your life that get in the way of you fully placing your trust in God?** Often these can be good things like our spouse, children, job, money, nice possessions, future dreams, etc. **If the Holy Spirit identifies obstacles, are you willing to submit those to God and his care, so your faith rests fully in Him?**

Finally, **what is God asking you to trust Him for... perhaps something that you sense He has been telling you for a long time?** Is there something the Holy Spirit is pointing to in your life this morning that He wants you to trust Him for?

Abraham and Sarah are renowned for their faith, and yet faith for them wasn't a straight line in which God communicated something and they unwaveringly walked directly into receiving his promise. Abraham and Sarah's faith journey was filled with twists and turns and marked by their doubts and uncertainties. I identify with that kind of faith, and I suspect the same is true for many of you. I relate to the father we read about in Mark's Gospel, chapter 9, who had a son who was oppressed by an evil spirit. He brought his son to Jesus to be healed, and Jesus said, "Everything is possible for one who believes." The dad immediately responded, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief." And Jesus healed his son. I'm encouraged by that

encounter, because the father's struggle to believe didn't preclude him from seeing Jesus heal his son. It appears that as we walk with Jesus, He chooses to strengthen our belief in Him so that our faith grows.

May we be people who place our faith in God and trust Him based on who we know Him to be and on what He has said He will do, and like Abraham and Sarah, may we receive the fulfillment of our Heavenly Father's promises in our lives.