

Genesis 17

How To Have An Uncompromising Faith

Faith in a Christian is to be a growing thing. And the way our faith grows is to see God at work in situations that test our faith.

The life of Abraham that we've been studying in our series on Genesis is a perfect illustration of this truth because he was tested and tried over and over again by God and through it all this faith blossomed.

There is basically two types of faith that we deal with in the Bible; saving faith and living faith. Abraham had saving faith because he believed that God was his salvation. Today you and I come to God for forgiveness in the same way. According to the Bible it's *not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us.* Titus 3:5

That kind of faith doesn't grow or get stronger. It's simply depending upon God for our salvation and trusting him for the forgiveness of our sins which He purchased through Christ.

But day by day faith, living faith or "faith for living" is different. It's a growing trust in God for all the areas of life. It goes beyond trusting Him for a future home in heaven to trusting Him for His provisions in the here and now.

This is the kind of faith that needs to be tested and tried and exercised.

God had made a covenant with Abraham that centered around three important promises. First, God promised him the land of Canaan that extended from the Nile to the Euphrates. Secondly, involved in the covenant was the promise of a blessing. Abraham was to be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

Third, and at the heart of the covenant, was God's promise of a seed, or descendants.

Abraham was especially tried and tested when it came to the third of these three promises, the promise of fathering a child.

To begin with, there may have been a time when Abraham centered his hopes for a promised heir in his nephew Lot.

Back in Genesis 11 we're told that *Sarai was barren; she had no child. And Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan; and they came to Haran and dwelt there.* Genesis 11:30-31

We're not specifically told that Abraham had centered his hopes in Lot, but the fact that it is specified and repeated that Sarah was barren and that Lot was included in the group seems to imply that there could have a time when Abraham was thinking that Lot could be his promised heir.

Of course, when Lot became rebellious and rejected God's plan it became obvious that God had something else in mind.

After Lot, there was a time when Abraham had centered his hopes for an heir in his steward, Eliezar. He didn't have any children and so as the custom of the day was he was going to pass his household onto his most trusted servant.

But God made it clear that Eliezar wasn't the heir, and Abraham was forced to walk by faith alone.

Finally, 10 years later when Abraham was tired of waiting and growing impatient he followed the suggestion of his wife and went in unto Hagar her servant girl and out of that relationship came Ishmael.

The story of Genesis 16 is one of the saddest stories in the Old Testament because it shows Abraham in a moment of impatience, weakness, and doubt trying to fulfill God's promise of a descendant in his own way.

So God tested Abraham over and over again with respect to this promise of a descendant.

When we come to chapter 17, after years of testing, God is now about ready to fulfill his promise to Abraham concerning his son. After 25 years of waiting Abraham is about to see the fulfillment of God's promises.

Open your Bible to Genesis chapter 17 Page 14

God's promises are always fulfilled, but they are fulfilled in His time and in His way.

I. God's Testings Are Designed To Lead Us To The Point Of Uncompromising Submission To His Will For Our Lives

Verse 1 begins - *When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram...*

Notice something very important here. 13 years had passed from the time that Abraham fathered Ishmael with Hagar (the last verse of chapter 16) until God again appeared to him.

Why did Abraham have to wait all this time before he hears from God again? Why must so many years drag by before Jehovah reveals Himself again and makes the promise of Isaac?

I think there are 2 reasons:

#1. We have a great deal of information about the events that took place between the time that Abraham left Haran and the time Ishmael was born. All of chapters 12 to 16 are a description of those 12 years.

But the Bible is strangely silent about the next 13 years between the birth of Ishmael and this appearance of God. Nowhere in the Bible are we told anything about any of the events of these years. The Bible doesn't tell us that God spoke to Abraham once during this time.

It seems to me that the silence of the Bible teaches us that these were wasted years, or years of spiritual barrenness. They were years of spiritual barrenness brought on because of Abraham's impatience.

I hope you're catching this because it should be a warning to us today. When we sin or become impatient with God, we lose something too. We don't lose our salvation, any more than Abraham did, but we do lose the joy of fellowship with God.

Our joy fades, our peace becomes depleted, our prayer life is limited, we lose that consciousness of God's presence. In other words, our life has a hollowness to it, an emptiness.

Abraham ended up experiencing 13 years of this kind of fruitless existence because he was impatient. I know he had waited 10 years and that's a long time for any one but in the end he couldn't wait for God to fulfill His promise.

Then I think there's a second reason for this 13 year wait.

Roman 4:19, speaking of Abraham's ultimate faith says, *And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb.*

God was about to act in grace but before we can really understand grace we need to see all of our human resources as powerless. Grace is God acting when we can't act.

According to the Bible, It isn't until we admit that we're sinners and that there's nothing we can do to earn God's forgiveness that we experience His saving grace.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

It wasn't until Israel was driven to desperation and despair at the Red Sea with no possible way of escape that the word came, *Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will accomplish for you today.* Exodus 14:13

It wasn't until Abraham's body was "dead" (in other words he was too old to have children) that God would fulfill His promise and give him a son. It wasn't until there was no possible way that Abraham could humanly be involved that God was going to fulfill His promise.

So, not only is this passage a warning about impatience, but it's also an encouragement. Here's something we should really be able to latch onto. God has a reason for all His delays.

All those times when we're praying and not seeing the answer yet, God has still

heard us. God not only does what is right and best but He always acts at the right and best time.

Think about the first coming of Jesus Christ. 4000 years of human history went by before Jesus came. What was going on?

Turn to Galatians 4 page 1035 read verses 4-5

The same is true for the second coming of Jesus Christ. He is coming but there is a good reason for His delay so far.

Look now at II Peter page 1081 read verse 9

God's delay in sending back His Son is due to His patience. He's not willing that any should perish. He wants people to be saved. There's a reason for the wait.

Are you troubled and just wrestling over God's delay in your life? God's got some purpose in it. He had with Abraham and He has with you. 25 years was a long time for Abraham to wait, but it paid off in his spiritual life.

God's delays are designed to test the faith of his children, to develop their patience and to bring them to the end of themselves.

His delays are so that when He does act His power may be clearly seen, what He does may be more deeply appreciated, and in the end God might get all the honor and worship He so richly deserves.

Back to Genesis 17

Now notice what God has to say to Abraham after this 13 year silence because every word is significant.

Read the rest of verse 1 & 2

I would take God's words in two ways there. First as a rebuke and then as an encouragement.

First this was a rebuke because it came in light of Abraham's impatience in chapter 16.

In effect God is saying "I am the almighty God, the all powerful God. I am *el shaddai*. You've tried your ways and failed. Now leave it to Me and I'll do it My way. The seed, the inheritance, everything related to it will be everlastingly settled now as I demonstrate my almighty power."

And as God reveals Himself now He does so by a new title or name. This is the first use of the Hebrew title *el shaddai*.

El is the common semitic name for God. It's found in various forms; Elohim, Baal, Allah, and it means "strength" or "strong one."

There's some debate though about the etymology of *shaddai*. All Hebrew nouns are built off of root verbs comprised of three consonants. Sometimes there are verbs which are similar sounding but have a slight difference in spelling. Sometimes, two verbs could have identical spellings and different meanings, just like some words in English.

Shaddi is either related to the Hebrew word for "breast," and means "nourisher" or the verb "to be powerful."

Keil & Delitzsch, which is sort of the standard technical commentary dealing with the Hebrew Old Testament leans towards the meaning of power. They say that it refers to the God who constrains nature.

The one who actually causes nature to do what is against itself.

God created nature and its laws and even though He ordained natural laws to govern the universe in an orderly, predictable manner, God is capable of reversing these laws.

God can work miracles within the natural order of creation. He's the omnipotent God, the one who is not limited in power.

Abraham and Sarah hadn't yet learned that God was one who could work miracles.

They had come to acknowledge that He was a personal God, one who loves mankind and wants to communicate with us. They'd experienced God as their shield and protector as they journeyed from Ur to Canaan, delivering them from the hand of Pharaoh, and protecting them from the four kings of the east.

But Abraham and Sarah still weren't able to see God as working the supernatural.

They only saw the whole promise of God through natural eyes. From their perspective they needed to help God out. From their point of view, God wasn't capable of causing Sarah to conceive when she was barren, especially when she was already beyond the normal age when women bear children.

They had an incomplete view of God.

And this incomplete view of God left out a whole important dimension of God's power. That lack of perspective led them to make a serious mistake.

To some people the study of "theology" sounds dry and heavy. Theology is almost a dirty word in some circles. People say we don't want to fool with theology, we just want to worship God.

You can't worship God properly without a proper theology. If there are aspects of God's nature and power that your not aware of, then you'll make some serious mistakes in your own Christian life sooner or later.

Well fortunately God being love, was willing to use their error to teach them, and us, a tremendous lesson.

The lesson is that He's the almighty God! He is capable of working miracles. He's capable of actually turning nature against itself. He created natural laws and He can supersede them if He wants to.

Significantly this time when God appeared to Abraham He gave both Abram and Sari new names.

Read Verse 5 Abram means "exalted father." Abraham means "father of many.

Then look at Verse 15 & 16 Sari means "my princess." Sarah means "a princess."

God gave them names that in their very meanings were reminders of His promise and His power to fulfill that promise.

This was a rebuke to Abraham, but it was also an expression of God's grace. His silence hadn't been punishment. It hadn't been revenge. It had been loving

discipline and training to help Abraham walk by faith and to fulfill God's perfect overall plan. And Abraham learned well. He didn't become weak in faith but he believed.

Well then, after God revealed Himself as the Almighty He zeroed in on a second lesson for Abraham. He finished verse 1 by saying *walk before Me and be blameless.*

A correct perspective on God (who He is, what He's done, and is still doing for us) should result in a godly life.

Abraham had failed in his walk with God. Now God was saying "I'm the strong one Abraham, walk before me. You walk uprightly, that's your responsibility, I'll keep my promises to you, that's My responsibility.

There are four passages of Scripture that refer specifically to the walk of believers. In other words the life of those who are God's. To Abraham God said "walk before me." Walk ahead of me. Don't run ahead or run away but walk before me.

Abraham was constantly being pushed by God to have his faith stretched and all the time Abraham seemed to feel insecure. But God was saying, "Keep going. I'm right behind you and I'll use my almighty power to take care of you.

In Deuteronomy 13 God spoke to Moses and said to Israel *You shall walk after the Lord your God.*

That one gives you the idea of a servant following his master. The nation of Israel was like a child, immature and needing a leader.

The third passage is in Genesis 5 & 6 where we're told that both Enoch and Noah walked with God. Walking with God indicates friendship, fellowship, full harmony.

The fourth passage is a New Testament one and it deals with us today. We walk in Christ.

Colossians 2:6 *As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him. We are united with Him in a perfect union.*

We walk before God as children, after God as servants, with God as friends, and in Christ as members of His body.

But Abraham was told to walk blameless. Is it possible to be really be blameless before God? That word *tamim* means “upright,” “sincere,” “without defect.” It doesn't mean sinless perfection, but it does mean “complete” or “mature.”

And the way to live blamelessly before God in maturity is to realize that you have an all-sufficient God.

He is the same God who promised, *My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.* II Corinthians 12:9

Our God is able to make the dead live. His whole creation bows before His will. Because He's the almighty God, able to do everything, no flesh is to glory in His presence.

I. God's Testings Are Designed To Lead Us To The Point Of Uncompromising Submission To His Will For Our Lives

II. God Is Faithful To His Promises And Faithful To His Word

Abraham was so overwhelmed with the grace of God that he fell down and worshipped as he saw the grace of God in spite of his previous unbelief.

Read Verse 3 through “face”

Now it's at this time that God changes Abraham's name and renews the blessing to Him. God repeats the covenant promises.

This covenant with Abraham isn't anything new, but this is a reconfirmation of the promise made years earlier.

There aren't any blessings mentioned here that weren't mentioned before, but the emphasis is on the source of these blessings. There are 7 “I wills” in verses 6-8.

- 1, I will make my covenant between Me and you.
2. I will multiply you exceedingly.
3. I will make you exceedingly fruitful.
4. I will make nations of you, and Kings.
5. I will establish My covenant between Me and your descendants as an everlasting covenant.
6. I will give your descendants all the land of Canaan.
7. I will be their God.

In effect God was saying “Abraham, you've tried in your way and you've failed. Now, stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.

What you could never do by the work of the flesh, now I will do by my grace and My mighty power.” It was a stinging rebuke, and yet at the same time a gracious divine promise on the part of God.

The original promise had been made to Abraham back in Genesis 12. Along the way more details were added to that promise.

In the rest of this chapter God now completes the details of this promise of a descendant. Two important details stand out.

#1. Finally Sarah was included.

This is where her name was changed and God specifically says “I will give you a son by her.”

Before this there was no word from God specifying that Sarah would actually be the mother of this long awaited child. But now the word is given. God is revealing Himself as *el shadai*.

That's significant, but I think there's even greater significance is the second detail that God was adding to His promise. Sarah was included but Ishmael was to be excluded.

Read verse 17

To say that this verse has perplexed Bible commentators is to put it mildly.

There's two basic interpretations. One says that Abraham pretended he was falling down to worship but really he was laughing in a mocking way.

That interpretation would have Abraham saying something like “What a joke! Is God going to bring life out of death? Are we going to see a geriatric conception and birth?”

Just reading verse 17 and isolating it from the context makes it seem like that's what Abraham is saying, doesn't it?

But taking it in context with everything else that God has said and everything that Abraham has done I think another interpretation is more accurate.

His laughter isn't mockery but joy. It isn't from doubt but from wonder and amazement.

And then verse 18 falls right into line. **Read verse 18**

This isn't Abraham trying to insert a substitute plan by saying, "God, use Ishmael he's already here." Abraham just doesn't want His son to be passed completely by. Even though he was born to a servant girl, Ishmael is his son.

God's answer is, **(read verse 19)** *Yitschaq* means "he laughs", or in this case "glad" or "happy."

"You really are going to bear a child through Sarah and I will bless Ishmael my own way."

Read verse 20 But, Verse 21

This is as explicit as it can be in ruling out Ishmael from the covenant. Ishmael was a child brought into the world through human methods. He wasn't a child of grace. He wasn't a child of the promise.

But the covenant of God was a covenant of grace. Flesh can never be heir with spirit and human effort can never be heir with grace.

The trials of Abraham are an illustration of God's dealings with us today. God allowed testing to come into the life of Abraham in order to bring him to the point of uncompromising faith and commitment.

God often permits testing to come into our lives today for the same purpose. He wants to draw us close to Himself and to conform us to the image of His Son. He wants to make us more like Jesus.

God is faithful to His promises and faithful to His word. What's our response supposed to be?

First, to simply take Him at His word. Believe that He sent His Son to die on a cross for our sins because it was the only way. The death burial, and resurrection of the

Son of God was the only way to get human works out of the equation.

Faith in Jesus Christ and His finished work on the cross is the only way imperfect people like us can be accepted by a perfect God.

So our response starts here. Acts 16:31 *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.*

Then, as God's children we can submit ourselves like Abraham learned to do, so that God may be all in all. So that God might be the focal point of all of our attention, of all of our allegiance, of all of our worship.