

Genesis 15, 16

When Your Patience Is Tried

None of us likes to face the hard times of life. None of us volunteers for suffering. And yet the Bible tells us that God, because He is God and is so amazing, can even use suffering for our good.

In fact the New Testament goes so far as to make this seemingly unlikely promise: *My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.* James 1:2-4

According to the Bible, testings are God's means of producing maturity in His children.

In Romans 5 an apostle of Jesus, named Paul wrote *we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.* Romans 5:3-4

God uses the tests of life to produce patience in us.

Have you ever prayed for patience and and it seemed like things in your life became worse? They became worse because God was answering your prayer by using tribulation to produce patience. That's the way God works.

We've been studying the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis and we've come to chapter 15. We saw how God chose one man out of a totally pagan family and made him a series of promises.

God promised to make Abram a great man with a slew of descendants we now know as the Jews.

Two weeks ago we saw Abraham rescuing his selfish nephew Lot from an invading army. He defeated this army in a surprise attack and then gave up all the spoils of battle by returning them to the King of Sodom who had been originally defeated by the eastern invaders.

As we come to Chapter 15 Abraham gets what is probably some needed reassurance from God.

Open you Bible to Genesis 15 page 13

I. God Always Fulfills His Promises In His Time

Read verse 1

God was saying to Abraham, "You may have given up a lot materially, but I'll be your reward. You might have put yourself in danger from reprisals by these powerful eastern kings but I'll be your shield.

And as God is encouraging Abraham in this way Abraham says:

Read verse 2-3

God certainly has protected and blessed Abraham but Abraham's mind's on the promise that God has repeated several times now.

God has promised Abraham that He would make a great nation out of him, that his descendents would be as innumerable as the stars in the sky and the sand of the seashore. God promised Abraham that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

But see, Abraham's getting really old. By this time he is in his 80s. His wife Sarah is barren and long past child bearing years. Humanly speaking, they weren't going to have any kids. The promise that God made of this great posterity must have seemed like it wasn't going to happen.

So Abraham did what any other man in the middle east would have done at that time. He looked over his servants and found a man that he particularly liked and trusted. His name was Eliezer. He made Eliezer the steward of his household and adopted him as his legal heir.

Now God is saying I'm going to be your great reward. And Abraham is wondering what are you going to give me since it looks like I won't have a child of my own?

And then God made him a beautiful promise. **Read verses 4 & 5**

No wonder Abraham's patience was tested. He had nothing to go on but God's

promises and circumstantially it looked like God's promises didn't stand a chance of being fulfilled.

Once again God reassured Abraham revealing his promise in even greater detail than before. In the darkness of the night, maybe when Abraham was tossing and turning on his bed with anxiety of this test, God took him outside and said count the stars - that's how many descendants you are going to have.

Now here we are 6000 years later looking back and trying to figure just how much Abraham really knew and understood about God's promises but one thing was clear. Abraham believed God's words.

Read verse 6

Abraham believed in Jehovah (LORD) and God accounted it to him. The Hebrew word is *chashab*. It means "to think" or "to consider." God considered him to be righteousness. Abraham was saved by faith. He was saved just the way we are by believing God.

For us it is based on a past act, for Abraham it was based on a future act, but the way to God has always been the same, by faith.

God Always Fulfills His Promises In His Time. God had made a covenant with Abraham. God had promised Abraham he'd have descendants, they'd have the land of Palestine, and through them the world would receive a blessing.

Back in verse 2 Abraham had asked *Lord GOD, what will You give me?*

God would answer by the use of a common ceremony that was familiar to Abraham. The word "to make" a covenant, in Hebrew, *karath* literally means "to cut."

In Abraham's day covenants were very important. A covenant was not a contract. A contract says, "I'll do my part if you do yours." A covenant says, "I swear before Almighty God that I'll do my part. period."

Two people would enter into a covenant by cutting certain animals in half and then both of them would pass between the animals to confirm the covenant. This is what

all this showed. They were saying, "If I violate this covenant may the same thing that happened to these animals happen to me," - death.

Read verses 9, 10, 17

This was an phenomenal object lesson. God was saying, "My covenant with you is an unconditional covenant that I'm committing my self to, Abraham. This isn't a 50 - 50 proposition. I'm committing myself 100% to carry out everything I've promised you."

Now, in one sense all of this was very comforting to Abraham. It would be like us hearing some remarkable sermon dealing with the promises of God.

But see in another sense it caused some real confusion for Abraham because as chapter 16, verse 1 says *Sarah, Abraham's wife, had born him no children.*

He had this awesome, dramatic reinforcement of the promises of God but when he got back to to his tent after this mountain top experience he still had the same problem. He felt better but the problem didn't go away.

His wife was barren. They had never had any children. But not only that, she was well past the normal age when women conceive.

Abraham was seriously troubled about his predicament. He didn't stop believing God, but like at other times in his life, he became more and more bewildered. It had been years since they had entered the Promised Land. How could God's promise be fulfilled?

There are some of you sitting here this morning who can really identify with this guy. You know what the Bible says...but. But there's no way it's ever going to work for you. Your situation is so hopeless and your so discouraged you feel like God's promises must be for everyone else but you.

One problem that we face along with Abraham is that of seeing the promises of God rather than keeping our eyes on the God of the promises. And there's an important difference. Looking at the promises rather than God tends to generate all kinds of questions and confusion in our minds.

Abraham didn't know it yet but God's delay in fulfilling His promise was designed

so that Abraham might learn to know Him better.

God's promises are as sure as He is but our faith needs to be tested so that we can learn to glory in God instead of His promises or in ourselves.

Ultimately it's all about God not just what He can do for us.

Years had passed since God had told Abraham to look at the stars and had said "so shall you descendants be." All of Abraham's hopes centered on the promised son but there was no son. Abraham was having a great test of patience.

While Abraham was pondering his plight, Sarah came up with what she thought was a good solution.

I. God Always Fulfills His Promises In His Time

II. If We Don't Keep Our Eyes On God We Tend To Get Impatient

Read the rest of verse 1(and she had ...) & 2

Two things are very significant about Sarah's proposal.

1. Hagar was an Egyptian. Abraham was again about to encounter problems as a result of his very self-centered decision to go down to Egypt during the famine.

The results of past sins can haunt us for a long time.

2. Sarah used "spiritual sounding" reasoning. She said "God's withheld me from conceiving so why don't you take my handmaid since the promise didn't mention me anyway.

Maybe God's got another way in mind for you to have a child."

Just as Abraham had once been willing to share Sarah with other men as what seemed to be the lesser of two evils in Egypt, now she felt it was necessary to share her husband with another woman to solve their problem. Abraham continued to reap the results of that Egyptian journey.

We read that Abraham harkened to the voice of Sarah. There are many times when

men should listen to the advice of their wives. But if the voice of their wife is ever different than the voice of God they had better not listen.

It got Adam in a lot of trouble, and it was about to bring Abraham a lot of grief as well.

Read verses 3 & 4

From our New Testament perspective on Christian morality, what Abraham did shocks us. Especially since he was a guy who was supposed to be so intent on doing the will of God.

But we have to keep in mind that Abraham's motive was right. He didn't have evil intentions. This was no matter of lust, like he'd been checking out the younger woman.

Abraham was actually attempting to do the will of God. He is trying to help God accomplish His purpose. But even though his motive was right, his reasoning was faulty. Listen to this.

It's possible for us to have right motives and wrong actions just like it's possible to have right actions but wrong motives.

Notice, we're never told that Abraham or Sarah consulted God at this point. What a lesson to learn from Abraham's life. The biggest mistakes he made came when he was under pressure and he did what he thought was right. Going down into Egypt, going in unto Hagar. But in each case he was failing to consult God.

According to Hebrews 6 it's through faith and patience that we inherit the promises. Abraham's patience had run out and by following Sarah's advice he was limiting God. The God that led them along and provides for them all this time could certainly work to bring a child through Sarah.

What Abraham did was to try and help God out in the accomplishment of His promise.

Can you identify with this? This is an all too common experience for us, isn't it? We figure God helps those who help themselves and so when God doesn't work as soon as we think he should, we devise our plans and programs to get the job done. In this

case, as so often with us what we end up with is doing more harm than good.

I see Abraham as making two very basic mistakes in this whole process.

1. He didn't wait for God's timing. He didn't consult God, but went ahead on his own.
2. He allowed the thought patterns and the practices he had learned from his pagan culture to influence his thinking.

What Sarah proposed was a very common practice in those days. In 1925 an American expedition uncovered the ancient city of Nuzi. It was 10 miles southwest of Kirkuk in Iraq. The main discovery was cuneiform tablets that were the official records of the city. Altogether archeologists found 20,000 clay tablets that shed light on the legal system at the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The Nuzi tablets talk about a number of things we're reading right here in Genesis 15 & 16 including this kind of arrangement.

The code of Hammurabi had provisions for a barren woman to give a slave girl for a concubine.

Obviously this doesn't make what Abraham did right. Even though his motive was right, his methods were wrong and he disobeyed the will of God.

It's interesting that in all the instances of polygamous marriages mentioned in the Old Testament there is not one record of a happy polygamous marriage. There's always contention and strife.

God's plan was set out in Genesis 2. One man and one woman joined together so that the two become one flesh. Any violation of that principle, whether it's polygamy, adultery, or whatever, always brings trouble.

There were results of Abraham's impatience. The first was pride in Hagar.

When she saw that she conceived she knew she had one up on Sarah and she despised her mistress in a way that should have been predictable behavior. If Abraham had stopped to think through the situation he would have figured this out

on his own. But more importantly, if he had consulted God, he would have gotten a clear perspective on why this was such a serious error.

The second result was jealousy in Sarah.

I. God Always Fulfills His Promises In His Time

II. If We Don't Keep Our Eyes On God We Tend To Get Impatient

III. Choosing Our Way Over God's Way Has Lasting Consequences

Read verse 5

Everyone wants to blame someone else for his trouble. Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent, Sarah blamed Abraham even though she was the one who made the suggestion in the first place.

Her jealousy turned to bitterness and Abraham and Hagar and every one around her suffered because of it.

So there was jealousy in Sarah, then the 3rd result was that Abraham lost his position as head of his house.

Read verse 6

Abraham was on the spot. But instead of directing Sarah in this bad situation in the house he let Sarah make the decision about what should be done. In fact really he dumped the whole unpleasant problem back on Sarah.

Sarah, in her state of insecurity and anger toward Hagar treated her so harshly that eventually Hagar ran away.

Well finally there was a 4th result of Abraham's impatience that went far beyond family trouble. This whole situation finally brought about international conflict and we're still feeling the effects today.

Read verses 7- 16

Hagar obviously was less blameworthy than the others in this unhappy situation and that's brought out by the way God dealt with her. Hagar had started for home to Egypt but she would have never made the journey through the desert. So the angel

of the Lord met her. And the angel of the Lord was really God himself, most likely Jesus in a preincarnate appearance.

He called her by name and sent her back to Abraham and Sarah with a promise of His protection and blessing. God promised Hagar a son, and even gave him the name - Ishmael, which means "God hears."

That name would always be a reminder to Hagar how the God of Abraham, not the god's of Egypt she was trying to get back to, had met her need. She named the well where the angel of the Lord had spoken to her "Beer-Lahai-Roi" which means "the well of the living one who sees me."

Verse 13 says she called the name of Jehovah who spoke unto her *El Roi* - the God who sees.

So in spite of Abraham's wrong decision and its unfortunate consequences, God continued to carry out his unconditional promises to Abraham. But when Ishmael was born a new chapter began in world history that hasn't ended yet.

From Hagar's son has come the great Arab nations who are in in constant conflict with the children of Israel, the promised seed of Abraham.

God told Hagar that the nature of her son would be literally "a wild donkey of a man dwelling against the face of his brethren."

The Jewish people today are obviously still suffering from Abraham's mistakes. Mistakes coming from a right motive on Abraham's part, but from a wrong method.

Now as with all Old Testament events this story of Abraham was written for our admonition and to be an example to us. We can learn some tremendous lessons from Abraham's mistakes.

What can we learn from Abraham's mistake that will help us in times when our patience is pushed to the limit?

One important thing to remember is that God hadn't given Abraham specific directions in this particular instance, only general guidelines.

And that's true to a great extent in our lives today. In most situations God has given

us general principles to guide us in making intelligent decisions as opposed to each specific detail.

So then how can we make decisions that bring honor to God and are in line with his methods?

Gene Getz has come up with 5 lessons and principles we can learn from Abraham's mistake that I think are valuable for helping us make intelligent decisions as we live for God.

1. We have to be on guard against the human tendency to take matters into our own hands. The first question we usually ask ourselves is "What can I do?" The question ought to be "What does God want me to do?"

Obviously, this was at the heart of Abraham's problems. Rather than reflecting back on previous experiences where he faced similar predicaments and trying to learn from past successes and mistakes, he got "locked in" to the moment and he He didn't consult God about the matter.

2. We have to be on guard against making quick decisions and snap judgments.

This also clearly a part of Abraham's problem. He wasn't sensitive to timing. He got in a hurry. Obviously, 10 years seemed like a long time to Abraham. It would seem like a long time to any of us. But a little reflective thinking would have reassured him that God wasn't in a hurry to work out His plan.

God had told Abraham in his previous vision that he would die before the promise of the land to his descendants would be fulfilled. In fact, God told him his descendants would be in captivity for at least 400 years before they would settle in Canaan.

There are times when we have to act quickly. But there are also times when we should be waiting to take action. Better to wait and gain a proper perspective than to rush in and make a serious mistake. Problems that are difficult to solve create an opportunity for God to display His power and guidance. Maybe that's why God is so big on us waiting.

3. If we're not careful, even those closest to us that we trust the most

can steer us down a wrong path.

Sarah's perspective might have looked unselfish on the surface but it was actually humanistic and self-centered. Not only that but, she was very emotionally involved with Abraham.

A godly wife or husband should be able to serve as a good sounding board for decision making. But remember, even though Sarah was loyal to Abraham she wasn't spiritually mature. Even when a spouse is godly, sometimes they're so close to the problem they have a hard time being objective. It's always advisable to consult more objective members of the body of Christ as well as those closest to us when making important decisions.

4. We must beware of the subtle influence of culture in determining the will of God.

Culture has a way of permeating our personalities and molding our thinking. It has a way of creating an influence that lingers in our minds and influences even our Christian lives.

This was part of the problem with Abraham and Sarah. Choosing to use a woman other than Sarah to insure an heir to the promise was a part of their cultural laws. Why not use an approved practice to solve this problem and overcome their frustration?

Watch out. We all have a custom-made set of colored glasses we all have as a part of our perceptive apparatus. When we become Christians we need to line up our "spiritual eyesight" with the direct teachings of the Bible.

5. We should always select methods and strategies that are in harmony with principles and guidelines of Scripture.

Generally, God doesn't spell out specific methods and strategies for solving every problem. If He did the Bible would have to be thousands of thick volumes.

Oviously He gives us many specific directives that are clear-cut. There's "thou shalt," and there's "thou shalt not."

But in most situations involving twenty-first century decisions involving jobs, marriage, education and business, God expects us to use the minds He has given us to think our way through these situations.

But we must never select methods that contradict God's nature or the way He works with people. If we do, we will make the end justify the means, and like Abraham and Sarah, we'll compound our problems. That's why we have to saturate our minds with the Word of God so that we can know the will of God.

God has revealed himself to us through His Son the living word that we might believe in Him and be saved.

God has revealed Himself to us through the written Word that we might know His mind and live accordingly