

Pray

Joyce and Mark and Alex have been learning to trust God this summer.

I have been greatly encouraged in reading what Joyce writes almost daily on Alex's caring bridge site.

It is like a personal devotion for me... not that Joyce writes Scripture there... not at all...

But that she shares her journey of faith through the ups and downs...

Days when she's supremely confident in God's presence and care. God's power is great and problems small.

Then other days when all seems bleak and the problems insurmountable and God seems far away...

That is what faith is always like.

For every person in the Bible who trusts God, their journey of faith is bumpy. There are no exceptions.

Think of the great heroes of the faith...

Abram (Abraham) Isaac Jacob (Israel) Joseph Moses Joshua Ruth Samuel David Elijah

Jeremiah Ezekiel Daniel Esther Ezra Nehemiah Mary Peter John Paul

I have listed only 20, but maybe the 20 greatest heroes of faith in the Scriptures... and not one of them had it easy.

Abram has been learning to trust God now for at least 24 years. He was 75 when he moved to the land of Canaan from Haran.

The whole while he has been a work in progress... He has been learning faith.

Faith does not come naturally, it must be learned.

And, you cannot learn faith without the passage of time. **Heb. 11:1**

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." = faith necessarily looks to the future.

In order to learn faith in God, one must have unfulfilled promises from God... yet to be fulfilled...

Gen. 12 Abram left his family in Haran and moved to Canaan. God rescued he and Sarai from Egypt.

God makes him a promise.

Gen. 13 Lot chose the sinful valley and God showed Abram the land that he did not possess but someday would be his.

God reiterates the promise.

Gen. 14 Abram goes to war to rescue Lot and God wins the battle for him.

Gen. 15 God swears by Himself that He will give Abram a son from his own body.

God repeats the promise more fully and Abram believes God. **Gen. 15:6**

Gen. 16 Sarai hatches a plan to get an heir. It goes awry. God extends part of the promise to Hagar.

Gen. 17 God will repeat and fill out the promise again.

Are you getting an idea of the theme of this part of Genesis? God's Promise and the God who makes promises.

Abram had to learn it... and it was written here so that the people of Israel in the wilderness would learn it.

And we too, need to learn it along with them... from them.

I. The Promise of El-Shaddai**Gen. 17:1-8**

Much here God has told Abram before... so let us not miss the first obvious lesson.

God is repeating His promise. Why? God's promise is important and we need the reminder. Because, we are prone to forget.

After all, in the Bible, forgetting is one of the worst and most persistent problems for God's people.

And, it's been at least 13 years since Abram had heard anything from God.

Are there times when you think God has forgotten you? Abram may have felt that way. It's never true.

We forget. God does not.

There are some other truths we learn about God in these verses.

First, notice that God shows up in person. He "appeared to Abram."

It is right to imagine God there in the form of a man speaking with Abram.

Consider how God introduces Himself. It is the first time in the Bible that He uses this name for Himself.

"I am God Almighty" = El Shaddai = Hagar called Him "the God who sees."

God calls Himself the God who can do anything... actually the God who does do anything.

He's the God who does everything. He's the God who does impossible things. You might say, "I knew that."

Did you? Do you?

Did you know that He's the God who heals the sick?

Did you know that He gives sight to blind men? In fact He made eyes to see in the first place.

He created the whole world, this God... no, the whole universe. He can do anything!

He's the God who rescues people from captivity. He gives children to barren women.

He makes kings and deposes kings. He wins battles and lets them be lost when He sees fit.

He speaks to lonely women in the wilderness and announces his plans to nations.

He destroys whole cities and spares them when He so chooses.

He's the God who lets people die and then raises them from the dead.

He can do anything. Nothing is impossible for Him. He does the impossible.

He does what scientists say is impossible.

He does what politicians say is impossible.

He does what doctors say is impossible. He is God Almighty.

Now, Consider the command God gives to Abram. "Walk before Me and be blameless."

How will he do that? God will enable him to do that.

Remember Gen. 15:6, "Abram believed God and He reckoned it to him as righteousness."

God makes Abram righteous to walk before a perfect God, just as He makes us righteous in Jesus Christ. He is God Almighty. He gives faith. He forgives sin. He makes people who trust Him righteous, blameless.

There are some truths we learn about God's promise in these verses.

This, by the way, is the most central promise in the whole Bible.

It will lead to Jesus Christ. It is still being fulfilled.

We are part of it... we are both fulfillment of this promise and the promise is now to us.

1. It is a promise of a multitude of descendants... a multitude of nations, kings.
2. God changes Abram's name to Abraham: Abram = exalted father Abraham = father of a multitude. He changes his name to fit the promise. The promise of God now defines who He is. God's promise defines who you are as well... your identity, your people, your home, your future, your God.
3. It is an everlasting promise. There is nothing that can keep it from coming to pass. The covenant will not fail.
4. It is a promise of land, a homeland, the land of Canaan... eventually in a new heavens and a new earth.

II. The Sign of the Promise

Gen. 17:9-14

Now things get a little weird. Every man is supposed to be circumcised. What a strange thing. Why?

First, why does the covenant between God and Abraham need a sign? Because we forget.

It is good for us to have a reminder of the covenant... something for us to do to express our faith.

Second, why circumcision? Well, do you know what circumcision is?

At this point all the mothers of small children are panicking! I'll do my best.

Circumcision is the surgical removal of the foreskin on the most sensitive part of the male body.

It requires a knife, and it hurts, and it is bloody.

Why would God require THAT kind of reminder?

1. It is painful. It is not something done casually.
2. It is permanent. It cannot be reversed, but it is not debilitating after it heals.
3. It is a constant reminder. A man has many times in a day when he will notice and be reminded.
4. It is done to a male. They are to be the leaders of their families, and Israel.
5. It symbolizes a cutting away of the flesh... a parting with sin. It symbolizes what needs to happen in our hearts.

In the new covenant, circumcision remains as a metaphor for devotion to God, though it is no longer law.

The signs of the new covenant are Water Baptism and the Lord's Supper, both important reminders as well.

III. The Son of the Promise

Gen. 17:15-22

Now God speaks to Abraham about Sarai, who's name God changes to Sarah, and about her son!

Abraham learns for the first time, though maybe he ought to have known, that Sarah is going to be the mother of many nations.

In other words, the covenant will be kept through her.

Abraham has two reactions:

1. He "falls on his face and laughs" and speaks in his heart.

Now, until this week, I have understood Abraham's laughter as disbelief. But I don't think so.

"fell on his face" = worship in the Bible every time. Abraham is surprised to learn God's plan. WHAT?

He is laughing at what he now knows God is going to do. Sarah is 90!

2. He actually tries, aloud, to talk God into an adjustment to the plan. (vs. 18)

Then God makes it clear that Isaac will be the son of the promise... though God will not forget Ishmael for Abraham's sake.

I can understand Abraham. Think of the adjustment this man has to make in his thinking and expectations.

For 13 years he's been thinking that Ishmael is his heir, the son of the promise. God has not told him otherwise.

Have you ever been there?

You're praying and trusting and reading your Bible...

You're convinced that God is going to answer your prayers in a certain way.

You think you have an idea of how life is going to be.

And, then, God steps in, in some way, and tells you that... no, it is not going to be that way at all.

You thought you knew His plan, but you actually had no idea what He was doing.

He is God Almighty. He does what He wants. That's hard to learn. It's a simple truth... but not easy.

No doubt His plan is better than our plan, or the thing we thought He was doing. Abraham was satisfied with Ishmael.

But, that still doesn't make it easy to make the adjustment.

IV. Obedience

Gen. 17:23-27

It is important to notice how quickly Abraham got to obeying God. He wastes no time. "the very same day"

And, he obeyed completely. I imagine there were some questions. It didn't matter. He obeyed.

After all, our Lord is God Almighty. He gives the orders.

He makes the promises. He keeps His promises according to His plans... we're always learning, catching up, figuring out.

But when He gives us something to do, we need to get after it. That's faith. That's what Abraham does.

Pray