

October 5-9, 2020 Edition

The "BIG Story" Of The Bible #19

Finding Jesus In The Old Testament

The Son Of Laughter

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: What is it that most human beings want out of life? Have you ever thought about that question? What do you most want out of life? I think most of us are looking for the strength to get through whatever this life throws at us with stability, poise, grace and confidence. In other words, how do I live a life of power? When it comes to the story of the Bible that statement can be translated, "how do I live a life of faith?" Faith is the fuel that powers the engine of our lives. It is the thing that keeps us going when most people would give up. It is the thing that (according to the Bible) changes us into the people we'd most like to be. Growing up I had the idea that transformation was some mysterious process that God just sort of zapped us with. We had no control over it- we just hoped God would zap us.

But that's not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches us that transformation is something that happens when we live a life of faith. And when it comes to faith there is one guy that comes to mind over and over again. In fact- this guy's life was such a picture of faith that he has become the definition of faith in a way. To such an extent that 3 world religions (Christians, Muslims and Jews) point to him as the father of the faithful, the paragon of faith and the picture of what a life of faith is supposed to look like. His name is Abraham and he lived thousands of years ago. In order to read the whole story of his life as the Bible records it you'd need to read Genesis chapters 11 through 25. We don't have that kind of time or space today so we'll read the sort of "Cliff Notes" of Abraham's life in Hebrews chapter 11:

It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going. And even when he reached the land God promised him, he lived there by faith—for he was like a foreigner, living in tents... Abraham was confidently looking forward to a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and built by God. Hebrews 11:8-10 (NLT)

What was it about Abraham that made him the father of the faithful? Trust in God. He wasn't perfect (far from it) but for the most part Abraham entrusted all of his life into God's hands. And at its most basic definition that's exactly what faith is- trust. I used to think faith was 100% certainty but as we'll see in Abraham's life sometimes faith is moving forward in spite of our uncertainty.

So what makes Abraham so good at faith/trust? His willingness to take the next step even if he can't see where it's going to lead. Over the next two weeks we are going to look at four things that challenge our faith/trust and tempt us to not take the next step that God is putting in front of us. We will see Abraham successfully step out in faith/trust even when he is far from certain about what God is up to. And we will see that Abraham becomes the perfect example of this verse:

Since the Lord is directing our steps, why try to understand everything that happens along the way? Proverbs 20:24 (TLB)

How's your trust quotient these days? How are you doing at taking the steps God puts in front of you even when you don't understand what He's up to? Maybe you aren't sure what I'm even talking about- then this week's lessons are for you. God has a plan for your life and if you take the steps He puts in front of you it will lead to a transformation (slow but sure) in your life you never dreamed and unleash a power and maturity in your life that will make you proud of who you're becoming (and it will make God so proud too). Why not start asking God to show you what your next step should be?

Tuesday Reflection: The first step or test that builds faith/trust in our lives could be called the location test and the question that is on all of our minds when God asks us to take this step is, where? We want to know what our step is going to lead to. We don't like the unknown and so we want to figure out not just what each step will be but what destination will I arrive at if I take the steps God asks me to take. The problem is, God generally doesn't share that information. He doesn't with us and He didn't with Abraham:

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. Genesis 12:1 (NLT)

We don't know for sure what kind of relationship Abram (God wouldn't change his name to Abraham for several years yet) had with God at this point. Lots of commentators believe this was God's first communication with Abram but we just can't know that for sure. What we can know is that God asks Abram to take a leap of faith- to leave what he's always known and go... someplace. I can just imagine what happens next:

Abram- Where am I going?

God- I'll tell you when you get there.

Abram- How will I know if I've gotten lost?

God- With Me there is no such thing.

What would you do? I wonder that about myself all the time. What would I do? Would I trust God or would I assume this God was like all the other gods that I had heard about all my life. The gods of the middle east were petty, mean, vengeful and they loved to play tricks on people. I'm not sure why Abram decided to trust God but maybe it had something to do with God's plan for Abram:

I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you." Genesis 12:2-3 (NLT)

I grew up believing that Israel was God's favorite people. That the rest of us were kind of chopped liver compared with the nation of Israel but that's just not true. Israel was a nation that was chosen by God to be the nation from whom His Son would come into the world but His plan from the beginning was to bless the entire world through Israel. Abram (and by extension the entire nation of Israel) would be blessed but it wasn't just so Abram (and the entire nation of Israel by extension) could lead a blessed life. They would be blessed to be a blessing. As long as Abram and his descendants did their part and acted as a conduit of God's blessings things went miraculously. Anytime someone decided to just hoard God's blessings for themselves and ignore the rest of the world things got dicey. God's plan is/was to send His blessings into the lives of those who would spread them around. Abram decided to trust God. Abram decided to take the step God put in front of him- to leave (I love the King James translation of this verse- it just says that God came to Abram and said, "Get out!):

So Abram departed as the LORD had instructed, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left. Genesis 12:4 (NLT)

That choice didn't just change Abram's life- it changed the course of all of human history. And it began a process whereby God would transform him into a man who was so good at taking the steps God put in front of him that he would become the very definition of a life of faith.

So how about you? Do you ever trust God like that in your own life? And it doesn't necessarily mean moving geographically- for most of us the "call of God" isn't about moving to another place. Rather it's a willingness to trust God with our lives. All of our lives. To say to Him, "ok Lord. You put the steps in front of me and I'll step out wherever they lead." It's a terrifying choice to make. A terrifying declaration that will begin a process of transformation in your life that will lead you to a place you can't even imagine right now. Is it easy? No. Is it scary? Yes. But I think about a line from C.S. Lewis' book, *The Lion, The Witch & The Wardrobe*. When Lucy hears Mr. Beaver talking about Aslan- the King of Narnia and realizes he's talking about a lion she asks a really good question- "is he safe?" I LOVE Mr. Beaver's response:

"Safe?" said Mr Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

I have learned that God is not safe- but He's good. He's the King and this King has a plan for your life. But it will only unfold if you are willing to enter into the location test which means you say to Him- just show me where to go and I'll go. So how about it? Are you ready to make that statement? If so I can't wait to see what He does in your life.

Wednesday Reflection: The second test/step God asks Abram to take revolves around timing and deals with the second most asked question that we have when it comes to God's plans for us- when? God tells Abram when he's 75 years old that the plan is for Abram to go to an unknown place and that God would bring out of him a great nation. Abram takes the steps God places in front of him and things go pretty miraculously for him but as time passes Abram starts to wonder about the timing on the whole "great nation". Abram isn't getting any younger and neither is his wife, Sarah. God had better get to cracking soon or how is He going to bring about His promise? So one day when God comes and renews His covenant with him, Abram can't stop from asking about the timing:

Abram replied, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I be sure that I will actually possess it?"
Genesis 15:7-8 (NLT)

You can't really blame Abram for asking, can you? How many of us would just take it on faith that God knew what He was doing? Maybe God has forgotten how old I'm getting? Maybe He just needs a subtle reminder? So Abram asks and God doesn't scold him. Instead God acts out the sealing of a covenant with Abram. At this time in human history covenants were commonplace. A covenant was sort of like a contract but with very serious consequences for the breaking of the agreement. It was always between a powerful person/country and a less powerful person/country. The covenant would stipulate what the less powerful person/country's responsibilities were, what the more powerful person/country would do for the less powerful person/country and what would happen if either party failed to live up to their part of the bargain. Then to seal the covenant a ceremony called a "blood path" would take place. A couple of animals would be slaughtered and cut into pieces. The bloody pieces of their bodies would be laid on each side of a path and then the weaker person/country would walk down the blood path and the imagery was very clear- if you break this covenant then this is what I will do to your mangled, slaughtered body. God tells Abram to slaughter the animals and arrange the blood path. But then instead of Abram walking the blood path God Himself shows up and walks down the blood path Himself:

After the sun went down and darkness fell, Abram saw a smoking firepot and a flaming torch pass between the halves of the carcasses. So the Lord made a covenant with Abram that day. Genesis 15:17-18 (NLT)

This used to confuse me so much. What is going on? What's the deal with the firepot and torch? And why is it passing between the carcasses of the slaughtered animals? Well, the firepot and torch are symbols of God. And when He walks the bloodpath Himself here is essentially what He's saying to Abram:

"I know you and your descendants will not be able to keep the requirements of this covenant I'm entering into with you. So I'm just telling you right now, Abram. When that happens and your descendants have broken the covenant, I will pay the penalty for the broken covenant. I Myself will be cut apart and suffer for the sins of you descendants."

If you've read much of the New Testament you might remember something Jesus said to His followers on the night He taught them to celebrate the Lord's Supper. He held up some bread and broke it and said, "this is my body broken for you." Then He held up a cup of wine and said, "This is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people."

This is God's answer to Abram's question of "when" will all of this take place? Did you notice God never really answers that question? Why not? Because timing is not our job. When we answer the "call of God" in our lives we are choosing to trust Him and turn the control of our lives over to Him. That means we trust Him enough to let Him set the direction, the pace and the destination of our lives. It's not an easy thing to do. Heck- even the Abram (the father of the faithful) couldn't stop himself from questioning God from time to time. But God's not looking for perfection. He works with imperfect amateurs (because that's all there is to work with) like you and me. What He wants more than anything is for to hear you say, "ok... I'm in. Show me what steps to take and I'll do my best to take them and let you set the pace, the direction and the destination of my life. But I'll need lots of help."

So how about it? Are you in?

Thursday Reflection: The third step/test that God asks us to take is called the process test and revolves around the question of how? How is God going to accomplish what He's promised. And when it comes to Abraham & Sarah, they get so impatient with God's timing that they figure they need to take care of business (so to speak) themselves. So Sarah comes to Abraham and tells him that he should have a child with her slave, Hagar. Can you imagine what that conversation must have been like? Ummmmm... I don't think that's a good idea, is it honey? And what's fascinating is that Moses (who wrote the book of Genesis) uses almost the exact same language here as he used in chapter 3 when Adam lets Eve eat the forbidden fruit- we are told the husband wouldn't think for himself. Literally it says, "he listened to the voice of his wife" which is another way of saying that he didn't think at all. He did what seemed easy at the time.

So Abraham has a child with Hagar (thinking he's helping God's plan along) and unleashes thousands of years worth of misery and pain in the process. Because the son who is born to Hagar is named Ismael and he would become the father of all Arabic people. Can you imagine

the pain and war and hatred that this world might have been spared had Abraham been willing to wait patiently for God's plan to be accomplished in God's timing and in God's way?

But I can identify to a certain extent with Abraham here. I mean... I can't imagine any of my choices are going to have the long lasting impact that Abraham's choice to help God out had but sometimes it seems like God's plans require something super human from me. Like it's up to me to bring about the impossible. But here's the thing- the crazy stuff that looks impossible is all Him- not me. He asks me to take steps that I can take and then He does the really impressive stuff Himself. Now I'm not saying it doesn't cost us anything but it's always stuff we can do. For instance, God comes to Abraham in Genesis chapter 17 and says this to him:

This is the covenant that you and your descendants must keep... All must be circumcised. Your bodies will bear the mark of my everlasting covenant. Genesis 17:10-13 (NLT)

This would be the sign of the covenant that God gives to Abraham. If you remember from our prior week's readings God does this all the time. We talked about the signs of Jesus' New Covenant being communion and baptism. We talked about the sign God gave to Noah being a rainbow. In a few weeks we'll talk about the sign of the covenant God gives to Moses will be the Ten Commandments. Here God tells Abraham that His sign of the covenant will be the sign of circumcision and Abraham says... "but Noah got a rainbow... couldn't we just do like a secret hand shake or something like that? Maybe a special hat I could wear?" Just kidding... he didn't say that. What did he do? He got circumcised (not sure what that is? Google it because I'm not going into detail here today ;o) Abraham is 99 years old when he gets circumcised. Ishmael is a teenager. Can you imagine that conversation when Abraham comes home and tells everyone in his household what God wants from them (the women all breathed a sigh of relief that they were women I imagine).

What does this have to do with God's process and the question of "how" when it comes to God accomplishing what He wants to accomplish in Abraham's life? It doesn't. Not really. Here yet again we see that God doesn't often share the game plan. But we do learn something incredibly valuable from this part of Abraham's story- God's plan will always include a life that is just different from the rest of the world. He tells Abraham that his (and all of Abraham's descendants) bodies would carry the mark of the covenant. No Jewish male would ever go a day in their lives without being reminded of the covenant God made with Abraham.

So what about us? Well, the New Testament says that baptism is the new circumcision. Somehow when we are baptized into Jesus' death, burial and resurrection it marks us with the sign of the New Covenant. It's not as obvious as the old sign of circumcision but the lives we are called to live will lead us into lives that will stand out to the world around us and single us out as "different". Older versions of the Bible call us (Christians) to be a "peculiar" people:

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that you should show forth the praises of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 1 Peter 2:9 (NKJV)

And that is exactly what the early Christians were to a world that just couldn't understand them. They were model citizens in every way except one. They were law abiding. They were humble and kind and they rapidly became the safety net for the sick, the old, orphans, widows and anyone else who was powerless and vulnerable. The only thing the Roman Empire didn't like

was they refused to worship the Emperor and for that they could not be forgiven. They were persecuted and some lost everything they had. What does that have to do with God's process? Just this- His process will always be to gradually change you from within to such an extent that over time your life will bear the mark of His New Covenant. Physical circumcision could be hidden- a life truly lived for Jesus cannot be.

God's plan for you is to transform you into the person He dreamed of you becoming when He created you. The pace of your life, the direction, the pit stops along the way and even the destination are of secondary importance to God. He is most concerned with your development into the likeness of His Son. That's His process.

Friday Reflection: So the question we're dealing with today is, how? How will God bring about the impossible (for humans) in Abraham and Sarah's life and how will He bring about the impossible (for us) in our own lives?

When Abraham and Sarah were both in their late 90s three travelers show up at their tent. Later we learn that one of these travelers is actually God. God tells Abraham that He will return in one year and at that point in time, Sarah will have a baby boy.

Huh? Say what?

This story is wild on so many levels. First of all let's talk about God's appearance when He shows up. He looks to Abraham like a regular guy. At first Abraham has no idea the man he's hosting is actually God. This is a first (that we know of) for God encounters. In Genesis chapter 15 God shows up as a firepot and a torch. His presence terrifies Abraham. Now God is as approachable as any other traveller that Abraham and Sarah might meet in their travels through the desert. Why? What's different with this encounter than the earlier one?

Sarah. Sarah is different. What I mean is, in this encounter Sarah is also present. She's in the tent but still, it is obvious that God is here at this point for Sarah, not Abraham. God even asks Abraham where Sarah is (not because He didn't know but because He wanted to get her attention is my guess) and from then on there is this strange sort of shadow conversation that takes place between God and Sarah. She hears God say that by this time next year she will have a baby and then this:

Sarah was listening to this conversation from the tent... So she laughed silently to herself and said, "How could a worn-out woman like me enjoy such pleasure, especially when my master-my husband-is also so old?" Genesis 18:10-12 (NLT)

Sarah laughs but it's not a happy laugh. It's more of a sad, disillusioned laugh. It's hard to tell when you read this story in English but the language Sarah uses to describe herself is very dark and self hating. The word for worn out really means "useless". Sarah felt like she had nothing left to live for. She had no children and even her husband was no longer interested in her. In fact, the word she uses for "pleasure" was not the idea of being pleased with a child- it was the word for marital intimacy. She was basically saying that this whole have-a-child-by-next-year thing was impossible not because of her biological ability to bear a son but because the idea of the process that leads to children (am I being vague enough?) is so out of the realm of possibility to her that it's laughable. But God hears her objections. He asks her why she laughed and she lies. God

knows she lied. He tells her He knows she lied. I used to think this was God scolding her but I don't anymore. Part of the reason for the change in my thinking lies in God's response to Sarah:

Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh? Why did she say, 'Can an old woman like me have a baby?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return about this time next year, and Sarah will have a son." Sarah was afraid, so she denied it, saying, "I didn't laugh." But the Lord said, "No, you did laugh." Genesis 18:13-15 (NLT)

Did you catch the difference in God's playback of Sarah's thoughts? If not go back and read Sarah's original thought and then read God's replay. Go ahead. I'll wait right here. God removes the negative self talk from Sarah's response. Most scholars agree that God is talking Sarah down from the ledge here. He's trying to change her self image... not just her biology. And when He says, "is anything too hard for the LORD?" He's basically saying that for the Creator of the Heavens and earth bringing desire back into a marriage is not a big trick as long as the people are willing to cooperate with God and one another.

In fact, the word that God uses that is translated as "hard" or difficult here is really the word "wonderful". God is basically saying, "do you think there's any kind of wonder left in this world that I can't bring about?" What is He saying? I think He's saying that when we turn our lives over to Him and take the steps he puts in front of us it will lead to a kind of never ending wonder land sort of life. We will never stop being blown away by what He can accomplish through us if we will cooperate with Him and trust His plan, His timing and His process.

How will this happen? God just smiles and says, "just you wait and see and you'll be blown away!" I think God loves to wow us. The problem is we get ourselves so tangled up in our own lives, plans and busyness that we remove ourselves from that place of cooperation where we need to be in order to make it possible for Him to guide us into the miraculous. But when we choose to trust and cooperate and take the steps that God puts before us it changes things. It even changed Sarah's laughter from sad/disillusioned laughter to a genuine belly laugh. After Isaac was born Sarah says this:

And Sarah declared, "God has brought me laughter. All who hear about this will laugh with me. Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse a baby? Yet I have given Abraham a son in his old age!" Genesis 21:6-7 (NLT)

Why will everyone laugh with her? Because truly is humorous. Can you picture the situation? Abraham and Sarah are the first patients in the Canaan hospital birthing wing charging their hospital stay to medicaid. They're the only ones in the grocery store with both pampers and depends in the same basket. They are the first family in history who all eat the same baby food because they haven't got a tooth between the three of them. This is truly funny stuff. People who believe it will laugh with them. People who doubt it will scoff.

The same things happens years later when a direct descendant of Abraham's finds out she's pregnant. This girl isn't old but people still laugh at the story. Why? Because she was a virgin. Don't believe it? You're not alone. Lots of people doubted her story (even her fiancé until an angel came and told Joseph that Mary was telling the truth). Even when the baby of the promise was grown up and had become one of the most famous Rabbis in Israel the people in His hometown laughed at Him and His dubious parentage.

God does this all the time. He LOVES to work through laughable situations to bring about His process of saving the world. He did it with Abraham, Sarah & Isaac (the first child of the promise). He did it through Mary, Joseph & Jesus (the True Child of The Promise and the true and better Isaac). He will do it through you if you let Him. He is still trying to save the world and wants you to be a part of that. Don't think He could do anything much through your life? Then you are in a unique position to see a miracle in your own life that won't just make you laugh with wonder- it'll make others laugh too. Some will laugh with you and some at you but other people's response to your story is not in your control or your problem. What is in your control is whether or not you're willing to take the steps that God puts in front of you. That's His process. That's how He transforms the laughable into the laughing. The pitiful into the powerful.

Next week we'll look at the last test that Abraham was given- the "why" test. It's the hardest test of all and you'll notice it comes after years of Abraham working out his trust and faith in God. How will Abraham handle it? We'll see but for this week spend some time thinking about what God might do in your life if you are willing to laugh with Him instead of at Him.