

Don't Stop Believing

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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You know, one of the blessed curses of being at my stage of life is that I have teenagers in the home and it's a blessing in a lot of ways and it's the opposite in occasional ways and one of which I'm reminded on a regular basis that words that I use, phrases that I use, are antiquated when it comes to our culture. They remind me often, "Dad, people don't use that phrase anymore. Or that doesn't mean what it used to mean when you were our age." And it's a reminder every day that I am in our world's eyes progressively aging and in some areas needing to retool my relevancy, but isn't it good to know that the story and the person and the truth of Jesus Christ is an ageless story; that the empty tomb and the piercing for our transgressions, we don't have to reinvent that story. We don't have to change the way we say it. For endless days we will sing God's praise and we will declare the same story and so it doesn't matter what era or epoch we grew up in, what part of the world that we call our original home, that the story never changes and the story never gets outdated and today we're going to reach back into the very first book of the Bible and see that God has never changed his story.

Let's pray.

Lord, as we come to this time not just of declaring your truth but reading and studying your truth, God, I pray that this would not be just a mental exercise or a religious checking off the box, but that we would come to your word and we would see it as just that, the spoken word out of heaven, and that it would resonate just not in our minds but also in our heart, and we would realize that when it comes to the change of this world and the different paths of the world, that you have remained true from the very beginning. God, we declare from the outset that all the issues and the problems of this world, we own that and we thank you that you're willing to provide an answer and you're willing to provide the solution through Jesus Christ. Help us, O God, today to see that even in the first book of the Bible. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning, I do want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of Genesis 15. As you're turning to Genesis 15, I want to welcome you today whether you're a guest or a visitor or whether you're a long-term member. I want to welcome you to week 3 of a three year journey. Now some of you are guests or visitors saying, "Three years? Where are y'all headed?" Over the course of about the next three years as a family of faith, we

have laid out a goal to systematically read through the Scriptures over this extended time or extended period. Now, I know there are Bible reading plans out there, you know, "The Bible in a Year, The whole New Testament in 30 Days," whatever it may be and those are wonderful but the intent and the purpose thereof of this plan is to use a limited quantity of Scripture so that there would be an increased quality of our time with and dialoguing and interacting with those Scriptures and today we find ourselves as we reflect back on what we've read this week in a section of your Bible that is one of the most historically important sections in all the Bible, but yet it's not a story that's simply relegated to history because we're going to discover that it's one of the most culturally relevant passages in all of the Bible for you and I's world today.

We're going to begin our story in Genesis 15 and today we're going to address the issue of belief, we're going to address the issue of faith and we're going to see three very important aspects through the life of Abraham in this passage of Scripture and we're going to see what are the promises that God has made us if we will believe in his plan that he has laid out for us; we're also going to see what are the problems that arise when we somehow think that we're smarter than God; and then we're going to see an incredible picture in Genesis 22 of what God has done for us in spite of our unbelief.

In Genesis 15, we pick up the story of Abraham or Abram at this time, and just a little backstory. Abram was the one who in Genesis 12 the Lord called out of Ur of the Chaldees. He said, "Here's what I need you to do, I need you and your wife, I need y'all to go to a land you've never heard of because I am going to create, I'm going to begin, I'm going to start a people and from those people will come a Deliverer, will come a Messiah, will come a Savior." You and I know him as Jesus Christ today and even though Abram and Sarai were well past what the Bible calls the stage of life where one could give birth, even though they were older in age, even though they were more mature in age, the Lord said, "Trust me. We're going to do this." We're going to do this the supernatural, only God can pull this off kind of way.

So they find themselves in the land that they went to and there's no child. In fact, there's no seed of promise and Abram begins to question and say, "God, I know what you told me but are you sure this is going to work out?" So I want to pick up the story in chapter 15, verse 2, it says,

2 And Abram said, Lord GOD, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? 3 And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir. 4 And, behold, the word of the LORD came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. 5 And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. 6 And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.

So the Lord comes to him again and says, "Okay, Abram, trust me. We're going to do this the way that I've laid it out. Look at the stars and even though you and your wife are well into your mature years, even though you would be classified in our culture today as a definitive senior adult, you're going to have a child and you're going to have a child the natural way and his descendants are going to be more numerous than the stars in the sky." It says that Abraham believed him and it was counted for righteousness.

So what is God promising Abram? What is he promising you and I today? The first aspect of this promise is this: the promise of this Deliverer, the promise of this Savior is exclusive. Now I realize in today's world that is a very politically incorrect word to use. Everybody just wants to throw everybody in the same big old pool and sing Kumbaya today but we don't have that privilege. In fact, Abram says, "Hey, here's the deal: we're well in age and it may not work out. Hey, Eliezer, not a direct descendant but how about this guy?" And later on we're going to meet a guy by the name of Ishmael who will come from a woman by the name of Hagar. Then we have the child of promise whom we know as Isaac. So as you read through this story, there are three possible lineages that God can work this out: Eliezer, the one who happens to be in his home; Ishmael, who happens to be by another device we'll speak of in a moment; or Isaac, the child of promise. What does God say? He says it will come exclusively through the child of promise and what we see all throughout the Old Testament even unto the person and the story and the life of Jesus Christ as described in the Gospels is that we do not have the privilege of saying, "Well, as long as you believe whatever you want to believe, as long as you're sincere, that's okay." We don't have that privilege.

We also don't have the privilege of saying, "Well, everybody even though it looks a little bit different, they all kind of believe the same thing." No, what did Jesus say? As he is approaching his crucifixion, the disciples are gathered around him and they begin to question him, they say, "Okay, Jesus, um, we put a lot on the line here and we've left our families, we've left our fortunes, we're trusting you and you're telling us that you're going to die and raise from the dead? How can we know?" Jesus makes this statement in John 14, he said, "I am the way, I am the truth and the life. Nobody comes to the Father but by me." This will be verified in 1 Timothy 2 where it says, "There is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus."

So when we look at the promise of God, not just to Abram but to our lives today, understand that God's promise to send a Deliverer, God's promise to send a Savior, a Messiah, is very exclusive. We don't have the ability to pick and choose the one that looks the best to us or the one that maybe a majority of people over here or there say that we should, but it comes through the person of Jesus Christ alone. But we also discover that it's an everlasting agreement. In fact, turn just a page or maybe two pages to the right to chapter 17. Chapter 17, we find this agreement, we find this covenant, we find this arrangement between God and Abraham described, shall we say, more in detail. In verse 6 of chapter 17, it says,

6 And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee. 7 And I will establish my covenant

between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. 8 And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

Two times in three verses the word "everlasting" is used. Without end. Cannot be ceased. Cannot be stopped. Aren't you grateful today that God's promise of a Messiah, God's promise of a Savior, is not based on our consistent obedience but the promise that he is giving through this declaration to Abraham? He says, "Don't worry. This is all going to happen because of my ability, not yours."

As you walk through the rest of the Old Testament, you discover real quickly that humanity has this perpetual problem of unbelief. We have this perpetual problem of falling into this trap of thinking somehow we know how to do this better, and yet God said it's an everlasting covenant. There will come one from the promise of Isaac. He will be the Deliverer. He will be the Messiah.

A couple of generations later, we meet a man by the name of David, King David, one of which the old city of Jerusalem is still named after today, probably the most powerful not just politically but spiritual person in the history of Israel from this point forward withstanding Moses. What happened in David's life? David when he should have been out battling a war, he's on the rooftop one night and he sees a young lady by the name of Bathsheba, enters into an illicit relationship with her, child born out of wedlock, husband killed on the battlefield. It's just as some people would say, they're just a hot mess everywhere you look.

What did the Lord do? He didn't forsake his promise. In fact, later would come a man by the name of Solomon who would be allowed to build the temple and everything would go well until all of a sudden he began to believe in and adhere to the idols of all these wives and concubines in all these foreign countries and we see ourselves on the slippery slope until Rehoboam and Jeroboam are born, but then all of a sudden these brothers get in such a mess, in such a fight, that there's a northern kingdom and there's a southern kingdom and they split the kingdom. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom falls to the Assyrians. In 586, the southern kingdom falls to the Babylonians and Jeremiah the prophet, one who not only prophesied before they went into exile but while they were in exile, Jeremiah says, "Because of Jeconiah, a king who was so wicked, that no human lineage will sit on the throne of David again." And yet God promised an everlasting covenant.

Now do you understand why the virgin birth is so important? Now do you understand why what we know as the virgin birth is so critical? Because when you get to the New Testament in Matthew and in Luke, we have two genealogies of Jesus which both point us back to this promise that was given to Abraham, and in spite of our disobedience and in spite of our natural attrition toward what we know as sin, God said, "I promised it. A

Deliverer is coming. It's everlasting and even though you do everything in your ability or power to somehow mess it up, don't worry. This is in my hands, thankfully not yours."

I don't know about you but that's a promise that I can grab a hold of. Those are words of truth that I would love to embrace in my life and yet when we go back to chapter 16, we discover very quickly a real problem in our lives, we have this desire to somehow think that we're smarter than God is. We have this desire to somehow believe that we know better than God does and so we fast-forward the story. There is no child. Abram's not getting any younger and neither is Sarai, and so we pick it up in chapter 16:1 and it says,

1 Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. 2 And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.

And they entered marriage counseling two weeks later. No, I'm kidding. That part is not there. But think about that. The Lord promised them a Deliverer, promised them seed more abundant than the stars in the sky. Years go by. The bodies begin to age. It begins to look like this isn't going to work the way God said it was. So what's our problem? A lack of belief. A lack of faith. A lack of trusting that somehow God does know what he is doing.

You do realize that this is not new in Abram and Sarai's life. In fact, this was a story we've been reading all through Genesis. Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve were in the garden of Eden walking with the Lord in the cool of the day, they thought they knew better than God. They believed that they knew how to live life better than God did. How did that work out for us?

Cain and Abel out in the field. Cain believed he knew better how to worship than not only what the Lord had said but how Abel had demonstrated. It didn't turn out real well.

How about what we know as Noah's flood? I mean, here's a group of people, the Lord comes and says, "Judgment is coming. Even though you've never seen 'water fall out of the sky,' it's about to for 40 days and 40 nights. Trust me. You're outside of the garden because of sin. You're in this mess because of sin and if you don't repent of your sin it's going to get worse." For 120 years they said, "No. We know how to do this."

The Tower of Babel. Even though God said, "I need you to disburse," they said, "No. We're going to build a name for ourselves."

Abram and Sarai fell into the same trap that you and I do today. Somehow we believe that we know better how to do it than God does and so it's a lack of faith. Then beginning in verse 3, we discover that our lack of faith, the problem is it gives us an inability or a lack of control. Allow me to share with you verse 3,

3 And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife. 4 And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes. 5 And Sarai said unto Abram, My wrong be upon thee: I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: the LORD judge between me and thee.

I'm going to give you a statement today. You may or may not have heard this at some point in your life but if you have not, you need to hold onto this: you get to choose your sin, you don't get to choose your consequences. You get to choose your rebellion, you don't get to choose the ramifications. You see, Abram and Sarai made a distinct decision, "We're not going to do it God's way, we're going to do it our way. This is what we want to do." What they did not get to decide is how this would play out. They didn't get to decide that Hagar and Sarai would end their relationship of friendship at that point. In fact, if you'll turn just a few verses later in chapter 16, verse 12, you'll see a consequence, you'll see a ramification that neither one of them could have seen. The child whom we know as Ishmael has been born of Hagar and in verse 12, this is the promise that the Lord gives to him.

12 And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.

What you see take place in this story is that Hagar's child would be named Ishmael, Sarai's child would be named Isaac, and though one was the child of a handmaiden, the other was the child of promise, and what we see is the original biblical Hatfield & McCoys. From this point forward, they will be at each other until this very day. You do understand that when you turn on or you watch or you read what we know as the news, what we know today primarily as the "Islamic people" are the descendants generally speaking of Ishmael, and primarily speaking the Jewish people are the descendants of Isaac. They're still at it today.

Abram and Sarai chose their sin, but they didn't get to pick the consequences. They didn't get to say, "Well, it'll be bad for 50 years, 70 years, three generations, four generations." No, in fact, it even goes further than that. It says he will be a wild man against every man, and what we discover is that Abram and Sarai's sin didn't just affect their family, it affects yours and it affects mine, and there is turmoil and there is chaos and there is dissension among the nations because Abram and Sarai refused to believe.

Now we see this in our culture every day today. In fact, I may be the only one in the room today, so if it is, just allow me to preach to myself, but one of the most frustrating things I see in our culture and it's all before us every time we turn around is that we have people and we have groups of people who so desire to do whatever they want to do and suffer none of the consequences for what they've chosen. In other words, "I'm going to choose my sin. I'm going to choose my rebellion, but you cannot tell me what the consequences

will be because I'm going to dictate and twist and turn them as well." I've got news for you: that may work in the secular world but it doesn't work in the sacred. When we decide to do it our way and not God's way, we choose our rebellion, we choose our sin, we do not get to choose the consequences. Let me ask you a question that we can't answer today: if Sarai and Abram knew about verse 12, do you think they might change their actions in verse 3? It's a question none of us can answer but all of us can learn from.

So God's given the promise of a Messiah but we see the problem of our unbelief and the ramifications thereof, but if you turn a few pages to chapter 22, we see this incredible picture that God gives us and I want us to see that this is not just a story about Abram and his specific lineage, this is the story for all of humanity. God has promised salvation, God has promised forgiveness, God has promised a Deliverer, and we have responded with thinking our ways are better than his.

By the time we get to this story, Abram was 100 years old when Isaac, the child of promise was born. Sarai, his wife, was 90. This young boy Isaac in the story in chapter 22 is a young man, so Abram's in excess of 110 years of age, Sarai, his wife, is 100 years of age, and the Lord comes to him and here's what he says, "I want you to take your only son, take him up on a mountain and I want you to end his physical life." Do you see belief on trial here? Do you see faith on trial? Because all of a sudden everything that's come to fruition in this one child is at stake and what you do not see in Genesis 22 is Abraham arguing with God.

Verse 1 of chapter 22, it says,

1 And it came to pass after these things, that God did [try, test, or] tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. 2 And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. 3 And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. 4 Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. 5 And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the donkey; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.

Now when we talk about this picture that God has given us, that his promise is still not only exclusive but everlasting, and in spite of our rebellion, there is this picture of grace, there is this picture of mercy, and the first thing I want you to notice about this picture is it's incredibly prophetic. I want you to just walk through some of these elements with me. It says, "Take your only son." Shall I quote John 3:16? "For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son."

"I want you to take your only son and I want you to go up on a mountain." We know that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, that passion event, took place in what the Bible calls Mount Calvary.

It says there that Abraham did so on the third day. You know, Matthew 12, Jesus is surrounded with a bunch of critics, a bunch of dissenters, shall we say, and they acknowledged that Jesus was supernatural; they acknowledged that he performed miracles, that he taught like none other, he walked across water, he multiplied food, but they said, "Jesus, give us a sign. Do something that nobody else can do." And in Matthew 12, here's what Jesus says. He says, number 1, "An adulterous generation seeks after a sign but as Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, so the Son of Man," he's speaking of himself, "will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights." Here's what Jesus says, "If you want a sign, if you want something that nobody else can not only duplicate or replicate, allow my dead body to remain in a tomb for three days and it will rise on the third."

They go on the third day and then what does it say? "They worshiped." Now let us not relegate "worship" to a musical portion exclusively for if you would allow me to define worship, it is our willing response to a self-revealing God. Did you know that the night before Jesus was crucified, he's in the garden of Gethsemane in John 17 and here's what he says, he says, "Father, I've completed everything you asked me to do." That is worship. Worship is when God says go to the right and we go to the right, when God says stop, we stop. So God had called him to take Isaac up on the mountain and to "sacrifice" him, and so when it says, "We're going to go and worship," that's exactly what they're doing. Now I don't know if they sang or not but they were responding to what God had revealed to them.

I cannot imagine as an earthly dad what this would have seemed like and/or felt like but I want you to go to verse 5. It says, "Abraham said unto his young men, Abide here with the donkey; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship," I want you to notice that last statement, "We will come again to you." Not, "I will come again to you but we will return to you." And one of the things that is so prophetic in this passage is it is literally declaring to us in picture who and what Jesus Christ will be on our behalf; that he is one that was slain but raised from the dead. When you go to the book of Hebrews 11:19, it says that Abraham believed God was able to raise Isaac from the dead. Do you see the prophetic elements here? His only son on a mount. You see the death and the resurrection and three days later.

It's not only a picture that's prophetic, but it's also a picture of provision. I want you to notice verse 13 of chapter 22, it says,

13 And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket

I cannot imagine that scene as Abraham and his only son are walking up the mountain, his son turns to him and says, "Dad, I see the wood and I see the fire, but where is the

lamb?" He says, "Oh, don't worry. God's going to take care of that." I cannot imagine the scene when Abraham not only attaches his child to that altar but he begins to raise the knife, and I can only imagine that when the angel of the Lord called out, it was the quickest altar call response in humanity's history when he said, "I'm here!" And he says, "Go no further. The Lord has provided." And what did he provide? He provided a ram. He provided one who would be in his stead.

You see, as we walk into the New Testament in 1 John 1 beginning in verse 8, it says let none of us say that we have no sin. We've all sinned, but if we confess our sin, God is willing and able to forgive us of our sin." Then it goes on to say, "But if we sin," and you know the word "if" can also mean "when," but I also see almost the Lord just kind of throwing it out there saying, "Hey, you know this is going to happen so if you sin, don't worry. We have an Advocate with the Father, Christ Jesus, who is the propitiation for our sin and for all the world's. In other words, he is the one who takes our place."

I want you to go back up to verse 8 of chapter 22 and I want to conclude with what may be the most powerful statement of this entire section. Sure, there's the promise that the Messiah will come. Sure, there's the problems of our own rebellion. Sure, there's this picture of the resurrection after three days. But look in verse 8,

8 And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb

In other words, we see a picture that goes beyond Mount Moriah, we see a picture that goes beyond even the physical lineage of Abraham, we see a declaration that God is saying thousands of years in advance that a Lamb will come to provide the sacrifice. Allow me to close by allowing you to imagine yourself there on the banks of the Jordan River. There is a man who is gruff in speech and gruff in attire, a man whom we know as John the Baptist, people coming up to him saying, "Why are you doing what you're doing? Why are you saying what you're saying?" And as he's taking people and placing them in the water and they're coming out, he looks down and he points to whom we know as Jesus and he says, "Behold, the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world."

You see, the promise that was made in Genesis 15 was fulfilled through the person of Jesus, and even though humanity then and now continues to rebel and struggle with this, it's an everlasting agreement, it's an everlasting covenant, and the problem today is the same problem as they had then, it's not that God has not provided, it's that we have not believed.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. You know, maybe you're that person today or maybe you're that individual who is saying, "You know, you're right. I've seen all the data. I've seen all the material but I've never embraced it for myself." You know, the Bible says, "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved," and maybe that's what you desire today, maybe that's your position today. I've got some great news for you, it says whoever calls on the name of the Lord.

I've also got some other good news for you, that your calling out to the Lord, it doesn't have to be out loud and it doesn't have to be this strict, rote, writing or sequence of words that has to be said in just the right order and with just the right inflection, in fact, I believe what Romans is saying there is it's saying whoever cries out with their heart their belief in the Lord Jesus, they shall be saved.

Maybe you're that person today. We want to give you that opportunity right where you are just in the silence and the soft music of this room, maybe this will be your conversation with the Lord. "God, today I just want to admit, I just want to confess what I've known for a long time but I've hit that point in life I've got to deal with it. I want to confess that I'm the problem. I'm the one who sinned. I'm the one who thought I was smarter than you. I'm the one who thought that my plans were better than yours. I'm the one who's messed up but I believe today that Jesus Christ is the answer to my sin problem. So God, today I believe, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to be born on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to pay the price for my sins on Mount Calvary on the cross and three days later I believe he rose from the dead so I could be forgiven and I could be saved. God, today I don't have all the answers to the world's problems, I don't even have all the answers to my problems, but I do know that Jesus Christ is the answer to my sin problem and so the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today, maybe you had that conversation with the Lord, we'd just love to have a conversation with you. We'd love to know how the Lord's working in your life, whatever that decision may be.

Lord, as we come to this time in our service, thank you that just like in Abraham's life, that you gave us a second chance, a third chance, and a fourth chance, and may of us would testify we've run out of realizing how many chances that we've had. Thank you that your covenant is everlasting. Thank you that your salvation and your forgiveness is not based on our performance but based on your provision. Help us, O God, today to just believe. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

At this time, I'd ask you to stand with me as our team leads us. Whatever decision, I'll be right here.