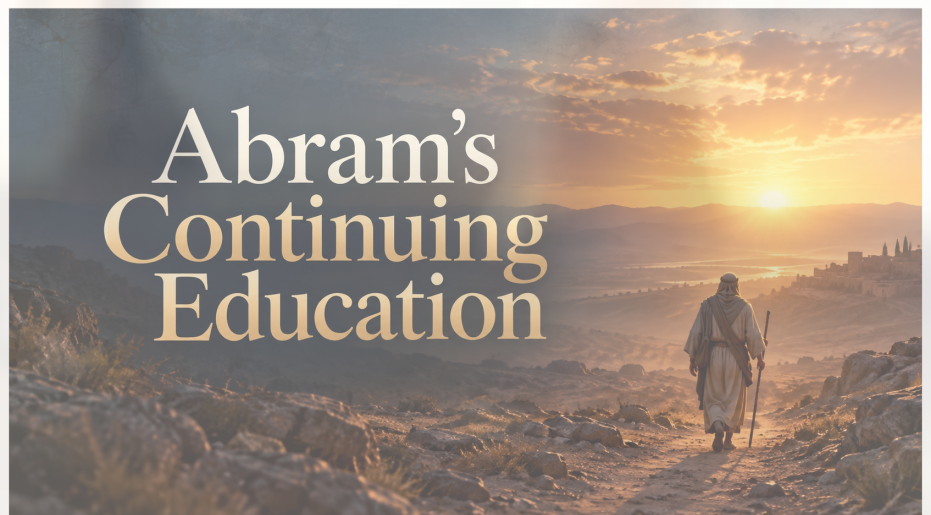


September 14-18, 2024 Edition

Following
The Year_(s) Of Jesus Part 245
Abram's Continuing Education

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

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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 ;D) 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: This week we are talking about Abraham again and looking at the last two steps or tests that God gives him which are part of what builds his faith. One thing about these tests is, they get progressively tougher as Abraham's life goes on. God doesn't start him off with the truly difficult tests but gradually builds him up to where he can handle anything. Why?

Have you ever tried to do any push ups? Some of you can do 100 pushups and some of you would struggle to do one. Imagine if you're the person that would have a tough time doing one pushup and God came to you and said, "I need you to do 100 pushups right now." What would happen? Would you quote Philippians to psych yourself up to accomplishing this herculean act? That verse gets thrown around a lot in Christianity. You've probably heard it even if you haven't spent much time in church. The traditional rendering of that verse says:

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Philippians 4:13 (NLT)

Can you? Can you do ALL things through Christ? Well, that depends on what you're talking about and whether or not it's something He has called you to do. The Bible is filled with stories about people who did things using (and maybe that's the key word here- using) the Name of Jesus as the justification for what they were doing and then failed miserably. One of my favorites is the seven sons of Sceva in the book of Acts. They watched Paul casting out demons in the Name of Jesus and decided they wanted in on that action. So they walked into a house where a demon possessed man was and ordered the demon out. The result was almost comical (not for them I'm sure but for us...):

A group of Jews was traveling from town to town casting out evil spirits. They tried to use the name of the Lord Jesus in their incantation, saying, "I command you in the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, to come out!" Seven sons of Sceva, a leading priest, were doing this. But one time when they tried it, the evil spirit replied, "I know Jesus, and I know Paul, but who are you?" Then the man with the evil spirit leaped on them, overpowered them, and attacked them with such violence that they fled from the house, naked and battered. Acts 19:13-16 (NLT)

I don't know why that story makes me so happy. If I knew these guys I probably wouldn't feel so giddy every time I read that story. I'll never forget the first time I read it. I was sitting in church and we didn't have children's church and I wasn't allowed to draw but I could sit quietly and read the Bible. I stumbled upon that story and had trouble with the whole "reading quietly" part of the equation. I wondered if they knew this was in the Bible? This stuff is crazy... not at all boring like most of the stuff I was hearing in church (at least it seemed boring to me).

All that to say this- why didn't using the Name of Jesus make the seven sons of Sceva successful (can you imagine if they were? If they had accomplished what they set out to do they'd be called... wait for it... the seven successful sons of Sceva. HOW AWESOME WOULD THAT BE?!?!?!)? I mean, if Philippians 4:13 says that I can do "all things" through Christ then why couldn't they cast out these demons through Christ? I think it all comes down to a problem with context. In Philippians chapter 4 Paul isn't saying he could do anything he wants through Christ. He's talking about doing the things Jesus asks him to do and in that

context he says there's nothing he can't handle with Jesus. It's like the famous saying, if God brings you to it then He will bring you through it. That's why I like the Living Bible's translation of Philippians 4:13 so much:

I can do everything God asks me to with the help of Christ who gives me the strength and power.

That's why it's so important to learn how to listen for God's leading. How do I know when God is asking me to do something and how do I know when it's just something I want to do (like the sons of Sceva)? Great question. And it takes a life time to figure out. That's why God starts Abraham off with tasks that are difficult but not impossible for him to achieve and doesn't break out the BIG GUNS until much later in his life. By that time when God asks Abraham, "how much do you trust Me?"; the answer is a whole bunch. Why? Because God didn't ask Abraham to do 100 spiritual pushups when they first met. And as Abraham did what God asked him to do (sometimes making big mistakes) his strength grew to the point where his life is now considered to be the definition of a life of faith. Ask just about anyone who the father of the faithful is and you'll hear the name of Abraham over and over.

Do you want to be powerful? Then do your pushups ;o)

Tuesday Reflection: Yesterday we talked about Abraham's successes- today let's spend some time talking about his setbacks. The Bible records at least three less than stellar moments in Abraham's life. And that's one of my favorite things about the Bible- God doesn't gloss over His heroes failures. You read about the weaknesses of the heroes of the faith right along with their successes. It's the only ancient book that does that. The Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, even the Persians had heroes that never made a mistake or experienced a failure. But the Bible- the mistakes are right there for everyone to see.

One time Abraham was in Egypt and he realized that his wife Sarah was so beautiful that the Pharaoh would want her for his harem. Sarah's being married wouldn't matter to the Pharaoh, Abraham reasoned, he would just kill her husband. So Abraham hatched a plan- we'll tell Pharaoh that Sarah is my sister and that way I won't die. So that's what they did. Now tell me, does this sound like the father of the faithful? Does this sound like someone that God Himself has promised to keep safe and create a great nation out of? Why did Abraham choose to lie? Why did he choose to do it not once but twice in his lifetime (the other time with another king named Abimilech)?

Because Abraham wasn't perfect. There were times he fell down and didn't really trust that God could protect him from someone as powerful as a Pharaoh or a king. And so he lied. Not exactly husband of the year kind of stuff, huh? Another time when Abraham and Sarah were getting old she suggested that Abraham sleep with her servant, Hagar, and that in so doing the child that Hagar gave to them would also belong to Sarah and that would bring about the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. Can you imagine that conversation? When Abraham agrees he has another black mark on his husband-of-the-year resume. And yet God sticks with Abraham. Why? Because Abraham, although imperfect, was committed to God. And commitment goes a long way with the creator of the universe:

The eyes of the Lord search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. 2 Chronicles 16:9 (NLT)

God had been looking and he found Abraham. Abraham was willing to fully commit to God (even if he didn't really know what he was getting himself into at first) and because of that God rallied around Abraham and gave him the strength to do the things that God asked him to do. And Abraham's commitment changed the world.

How about you? Have you "fully committed" your life to God? I can remember thinking about this when I was 20 and trying to recover my life. Why would God want my life? What could He possibly do through me? It didn't make sense to me so I asked a preacher who was kind enough to pour his time and energy into me when I needed it the most (thanks for that by the way, Steven Lloyd). I'll never forget what he said- "God wants you to fully commit your life to Him so He can use your life to change the world because... God's desperate." Seriously- that's what he said to me. But he was right. He went on to explain to me that there just aren't that many people who are willing to fully commit their lives to God. There are a bunch of us who are willing to be "sort of" in. We say things like, "I'll give my life to God and I'm more than happy to pray to Him to give me the stuff I want and I'll do what He asks as long as it makes sense to me but when He asks me to do something that doesn't work for me, well... at that point I just do what I want."

But when we look at God that way we don't have a God- we have a celestial Santa Claus or a glorified errand boy that we expect to do our bidding. We would never use those words but I am embarrassed by how often as I look back over my life I've treated God that way. It's a wonder any of us are still alive. Thank God for His patience with us. I can remember wondering why my prayers didn't seem to have much impact anymore. I can remember wondering why His power seemed to be flowing into and through the lives of others around me but not so much through me. I finally figured it out- I had basically been praying like this:

God... I need Your help in this area of my life. I need You to fix my finances (or relationships or job situation or some other area I couldn't maintain) but I don't want You to get involved in this other area of my life because I'm afraid if you do You'll mess that area up and I can't let go of that area so just keep Your hands off that area."

Now, I never really prayed that prayer in that way- in fact I wouldn't have thought at the time that that's the message I was sending God. But it was. When I (or you for that matter) pray a prayer like that it's like we are closing the valve that controls the flow of blessings, power and presence between Heaven and earth. That's not a picture of "fully committed".

When I realized just how messed up that way of life was in God's eyes I decided to fully commit my life to Him. To give Him everything in my life. At least I thought I had given Him everything. Over the years when the time was right He would open my eyes to another area I was still holding on to with a death grip and ask me if I'm ready to give that area to Him yet? And every time I give up another part of my life to Him I think to myself, "surely this is the last one, right? Surely there can't be more that I'm ignorantly oblivious to? Can there???" But there can. I'm a pro at not noticing the areas of my life I haven't let go of. It's almost miraculous in nature if I do say so myself. ;o)

But do you know what's even more (and I should probably say "is truly") miraculous? That even if I'm subconsciously holding something back from God He will rally around me and strengthen me even before I've let that go- even before He's made me aware that I'm still holding it back from Him. God's not looking for perfect people (good thing since there aren't any, right?). He's looking for imperfect people who are willing to let Him steer them into the life He created them to live and who are willing to be corrected as they move forward with Him. So how about it? Are you willing to "fully commit" your life to God so that He may "strengthen" you? I know what you're thinking. Probably the same thing I thought. "Why would God want to use me?"

Because He's desperate ;o)

Wednesday Reflection: This is the last and toughest test- how do I handle it when God asks me to do something that doesn't make any sense to me? When all I can think of to say is, "why?????" Abraham has watched as God has fulfilled every promise He's ever made to him. He has learned to trust God implicitly. Now the true test of Abraham's trust arrives:

Some time later, God tested Abraham's faith. "Abraham!" God called. "Yes," he replied. "Here I am." "Take your son, your only son-yes, Isaac, whom you love so much-and go to the land of Moriah. Go and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will show you." Genesis 22:1-2 (NLT)

What would you do? Yeah, me too. Thankfully you and I will never be asked to kill our child but just the fact that God asks this of Abraham is enough to put many people off so much that they won't consider following this God. But it wasn't enough to put Abraham off from following Him. Why? Let's spend some time looking at that question.

Infant sacrifice was commonplace in the ancient world. It was believed that the gods admired nothing so much as the sacrifice of a first born son. So for the ancients (Abraham included) this story wouldn't have seemed far fetched at all. Some commentators (you know what a commentator is, right? It's the opposite of a unique-tator...) believe that Abraham resigned himself at this point to the fact that the God he had entered into covenant with was just like the other gods of his region. That Abraham truly thought God was going to require him to kill his son. I'm not so sure (not that the commentators are laying awake at night bemoaning the fact that pastor Ed doesn't agree with them. A lot of people WAY smarter than I with WAY more education believe that). Why aren't I so sure? Because of the things Abraham says and the way the story plays out. Look at what Abraham says to his servants when they get near to the place God asked Abraham to bring Isaac:

"Stay here with the donkey," Abraham told the servants. "The boy and I will travel a little farther. We will worship there, and then we will come right back." Genesis 22:5 (NLT)

We will come right back. That's what Abraham said. WE will come right back. Does that sound like a dad who's getting ready to kill his son? It doesn't to me. It sounds like a dad who trusts his God so much that even if he's not sure what God is up to he knows that the original promise to bring a great nation out of Isaac is going to be fulfilled- NO. DOUBT. ABOUT. IT. Not convinced? Look at this exchange between Isaac and Abraham as they climb the hill:

"Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.
Genesis 22:7-8 (NLT)

Scholars point to this story as one of the greatest and best told stories in ancient literature. The suspense kills anyone who doesn't know how it's going to end. One of my favorite things about teaching at Riverside is how many of the people in our gatherings on a regular basis are not familiar with this story and have no idea how it's going to end. They are literally on the edge of their seats whenever I tell it. Did you catch what Abraham says to Isaac when asked about the lamb for the sacrifice? He's not cryptic or misleading (like many of the Bible movies that tell this story portray Abraham... one of them I watched has Abraham saying, "the Lord has provided the... ummmmm.... sacrifice my son."

That's not what Abraham says. He says "God himself will provide the LAMB for the burnt offering." He doesn't seem worried. He seems like the kind of guy who trusts his God so much that even though he doesn't have the slightest idea of the "why" when it comes to this test or the "how" of this test he's sure of one thing- God's promise will be fulfilled.

So they go on. More tomorrow...

Thursday Reflection: Now I want to stop for just a minute and talk about Isaac a little bit here. Of all the patriarchs in the book of Genesis, Isaac gets the least face time. In fact, growing up the only two stories I really knew about Isaac were this one and the one with his twins, Jacob & Esau and how poorly he parented them (from what I could tell as a child). Isaac didn't seem like a terribly "faithful" guy and so I didn't give him much thought.

Until I realized something having to do with this story- if Isaac is carrying the wood for the burnt offering on his back then he's carrying quite a load. Have you ever tried to totally burn up a lamb? Me neither but I can imagine it would take a TON of wood. And that much wood would weigh a ton (maybe not literally but figuratively). How old do you think Isaac would have to be in order to be able to carry that much wood on his back up a steep mountain path? Probably pretty old. He would have had to be a strapping young man. Teenager at least and some traditions say he was as old as 37. And don't forget- Abraham is exactly 100 years older than Isaac. Why does that matter?

Because I always pictured Abraham tying up a small boy who was struggling but couldn't prevent his much bigger, much stronger dad from subduing him. That's not the picture the Bible gives. What you find in the Bible story is an Isaac who trusts his father so much that even though he doesn't understand what's happening he lets his aging father lay him on the altar and raise the knife above his head. I don't know about you but that puts Isaac in a much different light in my mind. Could I have done that? I doubt it. I have trust issues ;o)

But Isaac did. He climbed that hill with the wood for his own sacrifice on his back. What did he think would happen? I don't know. What did Abraham think would happen? I don't know. The writer of the book of Hebrews says that Abraham believed God could raise the dead. Does that mean Abraham thought God would require him to actually kill Isaac but would raise him right afterwards? I don't know (are you tired of me saying that yet? Sorry but get

used to it... lots I don't know about this story). In my own mind I don't think Abraham expected God to make him go through with it. I think He trusted God enough to believe that that's not the kind of God he was in covenant relationship with.

And if that's what he was thinking, he was right. Isaac laid down on the altar and Abraham raised the knife and an angel of the Lord called out to him. I LOVE this part of the story. Abraham raises the knife and I can almost picture him holding there for just a moment thinking to himself, "wait for it..." And when the angel calls out Abraham leaves his hand holding the knife up there in the air and turns his head and simply says, "here I am..." What a cool customer, right? I'm sure there was relief in his heart but I have to tell you, to me it sounds like someone who trusted God so much he never thought God was going to actually make him go through with it. The angel says:

The angel said, "Don't kill your son or hurt him in any way. Now I can see that you trust God and that you have not kept your son, your only son, from me." Genesis 22:12 (NCV)

But there was still the little matter of the burnt offering:

Then Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. So he took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering in place of his son. Abraham named the place Yahweh-Yireh (which means "the LORD will provide"). To this day, people still use that name as a proverb: "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided." Genesis 22:13-14 (NLT)

Whew! So much in that one verse to talk about. Maybe we should do that tomorrow.

Friday Reflection: So the story ends with a ram caught in a thicket by his horns. Abraham helps Isaac off the altar and they sacrifice the ram and story of God continues. But where is Jesus in this story?

Everywhere.

First of all when we watch Isaac climbing that hill (in the area of Mariah according to this story) he is carrying the wood for his own sacrifice upon his back. A few thousand years later another "child of the promise" would climb another hill in that same region (the area of Mariah is where Jerusalem was and the Temple of God was built and that's where Jesus was crucified years later). He would climb that hill just like Isaac- with the wood for His own sacrifice upon His back. But unlike Isaac this time there would be no last minute reprieve. This time the blade would strike. This time Heaven not only remained silent but turned away from that hill as darkness fell over the land. This time an only Son would be sacrificed.

Do you remember what the angel said to Abraham when it became clear that he was willing to offer his son up to God? I'm paraphrasing a little bit here but basically Abraham was told, "now I know you love God because you didn't withhold your son, your only son whom you love." I am not sure where Abraham was during the crucifixion of God's Only Son but if he was there in Heaven with his Father I imagine that he had an erie sense of deja vu as he watched Jesus climb that hill. And when the Son died for all of us (Abraham included) I like to imagine that Abraham turned to God and turned around Genesis 22:12 and said: "now I know that You love me, because you didn't withhold Your Son, Your Only Son Whom You loved from me."

Have you ever wondered if you could trust God? I have. There are a lot of things in the Old Testament that make me shake my head and wonder what is going on? Sometimes things in my life happen and I wonder, "why"? Lots I don't understand but the longer I live the more I am learning to trust that God knows what He's doing. I may not understand it right now but on my best days I trust that in time I will. I am left wondering "how" and "why" all the time but whenever that happens I do my best to look at the cross and watch Jesus dying there for me and for you. And when I do I may not get the answer to the "how" or the "why" but I am always left with these words ringing through my heart- "now I know that You love me because You didn't withhold Your Son, Your Only Son, Whom You loved but offered Him up for me."

Struggling with questions? Me too. I got some really good advice once when it comes to questions. Get answers to the ones you can get answers to and the rest of them, offer them up to God. Because you may never know why God asked you to do something but one thing you can hold on to- you can always say, "now I know You love me..." if you keep your eyes on the cross. I'll leave you with this:

Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed - that exhilarating finish in and with God - he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. 3 When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls! Hebrews 12:2-3 (MES)

May you live today and every day with adrenaline shooting through your souls because of what Jesus has done for you.