



Today

refresh, refocus, renew

July/August 2023

ADVENTURES
WITH ABRAHAM

ALSO: DEEP SENSE OF AWE

Friends:

What comes to mind when you hear or see the phrase “the early church”?

Maybe you have heard about some of Jesus’ first followers whose stories are written in the book of Acts. Perhaps you have learned that these first-century believers were devoted “to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). Or maybe you have heard about some of the miraculous ways the Holy Spirit worked in these followers of Jesus. During the month of August, Pastor Ron Baker helps us reflect on many of the key events in Acts, inviting us into “A Deep Sense of Awe.”



But first, in July, we’ll focus on the person of Abraham. The Bible describes him as “the father of all who believe” (Romans 4:11). And as Pastor Dan Jongsma leads us, we’ll consider some questions like these: How does Abraham’s faith serve as an example for us today? In what ways can we deepen our faith in God’s promises—and how they point us to Jesus? How can we avoid some of the mistakes Abraham made? And how can we learn to walk more closely with God, as Abraham learned in his life?

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God’s Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

Kurt Selles

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**“Adventures with
Abraham”
Dan Jongsma**



**“Deep Sense of Awe”
Ron Baker**

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**ReFrame
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Adventures with Abraham

Dan Jongsma

july

In Romans 4:11 we read that Abraham “is the father of all who believe” because he lived by faith in God. This month we will journey alongside Abraham as he learns how to walk by faith rather than by sight. We will learn that following the Lord on the great adventure of faith is what we are all created for.

Daniel Jongsma serves as an interim pastor in Fulton, Illinois. He has pastored congregations in Elmhurst and Fulton, Illinois; in Dearborn, Michigan; and in Nashville, Tennessee. Dan also served as a church planter in the Chicago area. He and his wife, Gloria, have three daughters and four grandchildren.

Deep Sense of Awe

Ron Baker

august

The book of Acts describes how the Christian church began and, more importantly, how the Holy Spirit of God made that happen. Many moments in Acts note a deep sense of awe as people witnessed the Spirit of God in action. Whether you are exploring faith, new to faith, or have been around faith a long time, we pray that reflecting on the work of the Spirit may ignite a passion in you to seek and more deeply know God.

Ron Baker is a pastor at Vitalpoint Church, which focuses on planting churches in small towns in Ontario. He is married and has two sons, two daughters-in-law, and two granddaughters. His passion is to connect God's Word to our everyday life.

A LIFE MARKED BY FAITH

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went. . . .

—Hebrews 11:8

Though some of us are more adventurous than others, we all long for at least some level of adventure in our lives. Spiritually speaking, adventure begins the moment we hear and heed the call of God in our lives.

This month, let's travel alongside Abraham in his adventurous journey of faith. Abraham's journey includes incredible challenges, painful setbacks, and thrilling victories—all in the context of being called to follow God and to believe in God's promises.

Even though Abraham lived 4,000 years ago, he is still revered as a prophet of God by three major religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. He is considered the father of God's Old Testament people, and his life made a huge impact on human history.

But what made Abraham great? Ultimately it was God who did that. God called Abraham, and Abraham believed in God, and God credited that to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3). Because of God, Abraham's faith in God became the defining mark of his life.

This month, as we study the life of Abraham together, we too will be challenged to trust in God, take him at his word, and step out in faith. An exciting adventure awaits all who follow God's call.

Lord and God, you have invited us into the great adventure of faith, assuring us of your presence always. Give us courage and confidence to follow as you lead the way. Amen.

DEFINING FAITH

Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.
—Hebrews 11:1

Maybe you've played the "Trust-Fall" game. To engage in this game, you stand straight and fall backward into the arms of someone who is standing there, ready to catch you. If you have played this game, you know how hard it is to fall back without bending your waist. Entrusting yourself to a support you can't see is never easy. It requires faith.

Before we join Abraham on his journey of faith, we need to understand what true faith is. Often we think of faith like a spare tire—something we might need in case of emergency to keep us moving on the road of life. As a result, we tend to replace faith with something that seems more tangible, more substantial.

Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as "confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." Faith is a firm

belief about something we cannot see or completely figure out. But faith is not blind, and it does not conflict with reason. It simply rises above reason and operates on a different level. It doesn't say, "In human analysis I trust." Rather, it says, "In God I trust."

Like a rope that a mountain climber uses to rappel down a cliff, faith leans back and relies wholly on Jesus. It involves choosing to act in dependence on God. And when we do, God is pleased.

Lord, you know how hard it is for us to trust you with our lives. Help us in our times of unbelief. Bolster our sagging faith so that we may walk confidently with you. Amen.

GOING WITHOUT KNOWING

By faith Abraham, when called to go . . . obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. —Hebrews 11:8

Abraham had lived in Ur, a big city in its day, and with his extended family he had moved to Harran (Genesis 11:31). (Ur was in modern-day Iraq, and Harran was in modern-day Turkey.) Abraham was prosperous, and even if he wasn't looking for God to take over his life, God was looking for him with a special plan in mind. Because of this, Abraham's life changed in a big way. (At that time his name was Abram, but God later changed his name to Abraham; see Genesis 17:5.)

In effect, God said, "Leave your country, your culture, your clan, and follow me." That's not easy to do when you are 75 years old and successful and settled, as Abraham was. And God didn't give Abraham a map to follow. God simply said, "Go . . . to the land I will show you."

When it comes to God's calling in our life, we like to have both clarity and content. We want a detailed description of where to go and what to do when we get there. But God seldom works that way. God wants us to exercise faith, not simply our intellect. He wants us to learn to walk by faith in him, rather than simply by sight. Not every call of God involves relocation, but every call does involve leaving some of our past behind and venturing into the unknown with God as our guide.

Lord, teach us what it means to listen for your voice and to respond in faith. Remind us that the safest, most joyful place to be is with you. Amen.

WALKING IN THE PROMISES

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."

—Genesis 12:2

It would be an understatement to say that Genesis 12:1-3 is a pivotal passage in Scripture. Many of the key events in God's calling and saving his people flow from this passage. Before sending Abraham out on his world-saving mission, God loads him up with an armful of promises. God says, in effect, "I will give you my presence, my guidance, my protection, and my favor."

It's easy to focus on everything Abraham is leaving behind as he follows God's call. But we have to remember what Abraham *receives* as he follows. God promises that Abraham will inherit a great land and become the father of a great nation, and that all peoples will be blessed through him. Later God made this even clearer by sending his Son, Jesus, born as a descendant of Abraham, to be the promised Savior of the

world. Abraham didn't fully understand all the implications of God's promises. He didn't have to. God just called him to walk forward with confidence, trusting in his word.

In many ways, it's no different for us today. Though we have a fuller revelation of God's plan than Abraham did, we do not see all its glorious details. This means that faith is still required if we want to see God's great blessings, and to be God's great blessing to others.

Lord, thank you for your promises. We don't know all that's ahead of us, but we do know the One who is leading us. Help us to trust in you fully. Amen.

FAITHFUL SOJOURNER

By faith [Abraham] made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country.
—Hebrews 11:9

Most of us have a warm spot in our hearts for home. Even the word *home* can bring feelings of warmth, love, and security. Though we may grow up and eventually leave our home of origin, our home never quite leaves us.

For much of his life, Abraham was a nomad, moving from one place to another. Even though he left behind places that he could have called home, the book of Hebrews tells us he was “looking forward” to finding his home with God. That’s because God called him—and by faith Abraham followed.

Oftentimes Abraham lived as an outsider in a foreign land. He knew what it was like to be different from the people around him. As a sojourner, he faithfully followed the Lord as his guide and as God fulfilled promises in his life.

All of us who consider ourselves spiritual children of Abraham have a similar mindset. We follow where the Lord leads. As followers of Jesus, we are never completely comfortable or at home with the value system and lifestyle of this world. As a result, we don’t drive our stakes too deeply into the ground. Instead we travel lightly. Even if we don’t travel to distant lands, we focus on living as citizens of God’s kingdom. We live in such a way that we long not only for our home with God but also to help bring his coming kingdom here on earth.

Father, thank you for the promise of having our eternal home with you. Be our steadfast guide as we journey through this life, sharing your goodness everywhere. Amen.

IN AND OUT OF EGYPT

There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while. . . .
—Genesis 12:10

Earlier in Genesis 12 we saw how Abraham obeyed God's call, setting out on a long journey that brought him to the land of Canaan. Then he traveled throughout the land, stopping here and there to build an altar to worship the Lord. Now we have learned that a famine struck the land, so Abraham went to Egypt and lived there for a while.

We can experience downturns and crisis situations too. We take God at his word and step out in faith. But then our hopes and plans might be dashed by a significant loss. A job opportunity can fall through, a marriage can fail, a ministry can falter. We can face a financial or physical health crisis. Though we might be obediently following God, it can seem as if our whole world is turning upside down.

The famine Abraham experienced was likely a test of his

faith. But instead of trusting in God, who had brought him safely to Canaan, Abraham fled to Egypt. And that decision soon cost him dearly.

Just because we follow God's call in our lives, that doesn't mean things will always go smoothly. God often allows trouble to come our way in order to stretch and strengthen our faith. Rather than second-guessing God or our decision to follow him, we need to hold on to the Lord in faith, believing that where God guides, he also provides.

Lord God, forgive us when our faith wavers amid the trials of life. We believe you are mighty to save. Help us to hold on to you in times of doubt and trouble. Amen.

EMBARRASSED AND DISGRACED

“What have you done to me?” [Pharaoh] said. “Why didn’t you tell me she was your wife?”
—Genesis 12:18-19

When a famine came to the land of Canaan, Abraham left the land God had promised him and went to Egypt. Didn’t Abraham trust God enough to provide for him?

Then, in Egypt, as we can see, Abraham depended more on his wits than on God. Fearing that his wife’s beauty would create a problem, Abraham lied, saying that Sarai was his sister. Rather than trusting in God’s protection, Abraham did what many of us do. He gave in to his fears and went into self-protection mode.

The result of Abraham’s scheming is that Sarai is taken into Pharaoh’s harem, and then Pharaoh and his household get sick. Eventually discovering the truth, Pharaoh confronts Abraham. There is more than a bit of irony in this scene—a ruler who worships other gods reprimands a God-fearing be-

liever for not doing the right thing.

God’s rebuke of Abraham comes through the words of Pharaoh. We can be sure that Abraham felt the sting of humiliation for his faithless acts. The point is that God can use all kinds of means to get his message across to his people who stray from his calling.

Have you ever been rebuked in such a way for stumbling in your walk of faith? It’s embarrassing and humiliating. But God’s grace overrides his people’s failures. In his grace, God is willing to forgive, restore, and redirect our steps back to his way of right living.

Lord, when we fail, give us more grace. Though we can step out of your will, it’s good to know that we never step out of your care. Amen.

TAKING YOUR WORSHIP WITH YOU

He went from place to place until he came . . . to the place between Bethel and Ai . . . where he had first built an altar.

—Genesis 13:3-4

In the 1990s I was involved in planting a new church in a suburb of Chicago. We had no church building of our own, so we had to be portable. As a result, we ended up worshiping in six different locations within five years. In that way we were something like Abraham, who took his worship with him as he moved around.

Several times in Genesis 12-13 we read that Abraham built an altar to the Lord—turning ordinary places into sacred spaces. This showed that wherever he went, Abraham could worship God. It also showed that God is totally different from the false gods of other nations, who believed their gods had power only in their area or over certain things. In fact, God is the one true God, the Lord of heaven and earth. God is everywhere, and he rules over all things. Sadly, we

do not read of Abraham worshipping God while he was in Egypt, but God was there anyway, protecting him and Sarai (Genesis 12:10-20).

Having come back from Egypt, Abraham made worship a priority. Through worship his faith was strengthened and his vision expanded.

Worship can have the same effect on us. And instead of only having a brief time of worship in a church on Sunday, we can take our worship with us every day, giving God glory wherever we go and in everything we do.

Lord God, may we praise you always. May your glory be reflected in all we say and do. Keep us faithful in worshipping you, Lord. Amen.

DANCING WITH THE DEVIL

Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan toward Zoar was well watered . . . like the land of Egypt.

—Genesis 13:10

Abraham and his nephew Lot were wealthy shepherders. But bickering broke out between their herdsmen. To resolve this turf war, Abraham suggested they herd their livestock in separate areas. After all, there was plenty of good land to use.

Lot eyed the fertile land by the Jordan River. He wanted the best for himself, so the choice became a no-brainer for him. But Lot lacked discernment and saw only the attraction of the land in front of him. He did not consider the long-term spiritual consequences of living near Sodom and Gomorrah, with their evil influences—or maybe he just didn't care. Lot's vision was clouded by the material prosperity he saw. He pitched his tents near Sodom—and eventually became a resident there (Genesis 14:11). Later on, Lot lost everything—

even those who were close to him. Small concessions and little compromises along the way led to disaster (Genesis 19).

Lot's life serves as a warning sign. We cannot compromise with wickedness and evil and come away unscathed. We cannot dance with the devil without getting hurt. Moral compromise begins with small steps in the wrong direction.

Lord, worldly pleasures and earthly gains dazzle us, and we can easily lose our way. Guide us to ask for your wisdom and to live by it. Strengthen us to be able to resist the devil and to draw near to you. In Jesus, Amen.

TRUSTING GOD

The LORD said to Abram . . . "All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever." —Genesis 13:14-15

As the elder family member, Abraham had the right to choose which land he would take for himself. But he surrendered that right and let his nephew Lot choose first. Setting his sights on greater things, Abraham trusted God to take care of him, no matter which part of the land he would receive.

In faith, Abraham turned the situation over to the Lord—not allowing his possessions to possess him. This freed him to enjoy God's blessings without clinging to them or grasping for more. Abraham was able to hold on loosely to the things of this world.

And surprisingly, Abraham received more than he gave up. God promised him that one day all of the land he could see around him would belong to him and his descendants. From this we learn that God honors

those who yield their rights and surrender their resources for his greater purposes.

Abraham's choice points us to Jesus, who chose to give up his rights for a more glorious purpose. Philippians 2:6-9 explains that Jesus "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped," but instead "emptied himself" for our sake. And in doing that, he received "the name that is above every name." Be assured that God blesses all who entrust their future to him.

Lord Jesus, thank you for giving yourself for our sake. May our lives reflect the same attitude, pointing others to your great love for us all. Amen.

A FRIEND IN THE HIGHEST PLACE

Melchizedek king of Salem . . . was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram. . . . Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.
—Genesis 14:18-20

Often in daily life, it's not what you know but who you know that counts. The same is true in our spiritual life: what matters most for our salvation is not what we know but who we know. As believers in Christ, we know the One whose name is above every other name. Jesus, Lord of all, is seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven.

Genesis 14 and Hebrews 7 tell us about Abraham's remarkable encounter with Melchizedek—a man who had a high position of authority in the ancient world. Although he is a mysterious figure in Scripture, Melchizedek was both a king and a priest of the highest order. And yet he came to bless Abraham. And Abraham responded by giving a tenth of his possessions (a symbol of gratitude) to this great king.

On multiple levels, Melchizedek is a representative of Jesus Christ, our great high priest and eternal King. Mighty in power, Jesus came in grace to bless and forgive. In response, we acknowledge his rightful rule over us. And we express our gratitude by returning a portion of our possessions to him.

Having this friend in the highest place means that we can “approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace” (Hebrews 4:16).

Lord Jesus, thank you for befriending us and being gracious to us even when we do not deserve it. May our lives be an expression of gratitude for all you have done for us. Amen.

WHEN IT'S HARD TO TRUST GOD

Abram said, "Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?"
—Genesis 15:2

Despite having great faith, Abraham could be unsettled by nagging fears and doubts.

That is why, in the opening of Genesis 15, God says to him, "Do not be afraid. . . . I am your shield, your very great reward." Abraham was struggling to believe. God's promise to make him the father of a great nation was now about ten years old, and he and Sarai did not have a child.

We all know the pain of promises unfulfilled; they can leave an aching void in our hearts and homes. Perhaps we follow God's call and step out in faith. We risk something for his kingdom, but we don't see the hoped-for results. At times like that, it can be hard to keep trusting in God. Like the psalmist we cry out, "How long, LORD, how long?" (Psalm 6:3).

The good news is that God understands our doubts and fears. He graciously responds to the prayer that says, "Lord, I believe. Help me overcome my unbelief. Help me trust you more—even when I don't see or understand your ways, even when it seems to be taking so long" (see Mark 9:24).

God explains that his ways are higher than we can imagine (Isaiah 55:9). And his timing is impeccable—never early, never late. Trusting in these truths allows us to experience God's peace and rest.

Heavenly Father, calm our anxious minds and troubled hearts today. Help us to trust you completely with whatever is disturbing us. In the powerful name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

RECEIVING CREDIT

Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.
—Genesis 15:6

Wrapped into the story of Abraham is this foundational truth about eternal salvation. The apostle Paul picks up this truth and unpacks it for us in Romans 4 (see also Galatians 3). This helps us to see that there is only one way to be made right with God—and that is through faith.

In Romans 4, Paul speaks of two kinds of righteousness. The first kind has to do with keeping God's law in order to be acceptable to God. In this scenario, hard work and self-sacrificing service earn the award of being righteous before God. Only Jesus could accomplish this, because he is the only human who never sinned or broke God's law.

The other kind of righteousness is applied through faith in God and in his power to save us through Jesus, his Son. When we believe and trust in

God, as Abraham did, we are credited with the righteousness that Jesus earned for us. This benefit comes to all who believe—from Abraham on down through the centuries to us today. When God looks at us, he doesn't see all the good or bad things we have done. Instead, he sees us clothed in Jesus' righteousness.

Christ's once-for-all sacrifice is sufficient for our complete salvation. There is nothing we can add to it. The only thing left is to believe, receive eternal life, and demonstrate our gratitude through a life of humble service.

Lord Jesus, thank you for all you have done to save us, so that we can be credited with your righteousness. Guide us to trust and serve you always. Amen.

THE COVENANT-MAKING GOD

The LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to . . . the Euphrates."
—Genesis 15:18

Politicians make lots of promises, especially during campaigns. But we are not surprised when their lofty promises are broken. Today, in fact, it seems to be getting harder and harder to find people whose word is credible. Could that be why we might struggle also to take God at his word?

Yet God reveals himself as the promise-making, promise-keeping God. Through trial and error, Abraham came to discover that God is the only One who can always be counted on. God is forever true to his word.

In ancient times, kings often made covenants with their subjects. These were formal agreements, including oaths and solemn vows, to establish and maintain relationships.

In Genesis 15 Abraham's doubts led to a covenantal

response from God, by which God sealed his promises with an oath. In those days, oaths were often sealed by means of a gory ceremony involving the slaughter of animals. This was intended to show that if the covenant were broken, the violator would suffer the same fate as the animals. Amazingly, God made this kind of oath with Abraham, promising to bless him and his descendants. And God remained true to his word, as always.

What promise of God do you need to rely on today?

Thank you, Lord, for always being trustworthy and true. Help us to know that when you make a promise, you will surely fulfill it. Amen.

NO SHORTCUTS

She said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her."
—Genesis 16:2

It's human nature to try to control our own destiny. We take matters into our own hands and make something happen—whether it be in business, finance, or family matters. We may even take ill-advised shortcuts to get there.

Abraham is a case in point. Genesis 16 records one of the darkest blots on his spiritual record. We see this man of faith acting without faith. Frustrated with the delay in God's plan to give them a child, Abraham and Sarai take matters into their own hands. They devise a scheme for getting what God has promised them. In effect, they try to provide their own solution rather than trusting in God's timing. In a startling act of unfaithfulness, Abraham sleeps with his wife's servant Hagar.

This unholy shortcut brings deep and lasting trouble. Hagar becomes pregnant, and soon jealousy breaks out between Sarai and Hagar, and Hagar runs away.

May this tragedy warn us against taking moral shortcuts, compromising our principles, and trying to play God. It's good to know that when we walk with God, his delays are never dead-ends—and that because of his grace, our failures are never final.

Father, forgive us when we lose confidence in you and take matters into our own hands. Help us instead to trust in you and in your plan for our lives. In Jesus, Amen.

THE WISDOM OF WAITING

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you. —2 Peter 3:9

Abraham struggled to wait for his and Sarai's promised child to be born. It seemed to him that God was too slow in keeping his promises. Eventually Abraham and Sarai lost patience with God and tried to have a child in their own unsanctified way (through Sarai's servant). In his foolishness, Abraham ran ahead of God—leaving a path of relational carnage in his wake.

Many of us can probably recall times when we have done something similar. We were unhappy with God's timing and began doubting his reliability. Maybe we didn't go as far as Abraham did, but we still charged ahead and tried to direct our own destiny.

Often we find it easier to work rather than wait, to try harder rather than to trust, to play God rather than to surrender to him. But Abraham learned

the hard way that there is one thing worse than waiting for God—and that is wishing you had waited. Abraham spent the rest of his life regretting his lack of faith and the rashness of his actions.

God's timing and ours are often not in sync, so we are called to wait. And yet the Lord is not slow in keeping his promises (2 Peter 3:9). From the perspective of eternity, God's timing is perfect. Our calling is simply to trust God, giving him the time and space needed to work out his good plan.

Lord, it is a privilege to be part of your great plan to restore this world. Help us to step into that plan, waiting patiently to see what you will do in us and through us. Amen.

GOD OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and . . . I will . . . greatly increase your numbers."

—Genesis 17:1-2

Often when God wants to do something big, he starts with something small. Such was the case with Abraham and Sarai. God took an elderly, childless couple and made them fruitful beyond belief. What seems impossible to human beings is very possible with God.

It had been 24 years since God first promised Abraham that he would become the father of a great nation (see Genesis 12:1-4). Several times through those years God reaffirmed his promise and even ceremonially sealed it. Still, Abraham and Sarai were without children. In Genesis 17 God affirmed this promise again by revealing his special name *El Shaddai*, meaning "God Almighty." Then he changed Abram's name to *Abraham*, meaning "father of many," and spelled out further details of his plan. God also

changed Sarai's name to *Sarah*, meaning "princess" (see v. 15). Even though the promise had yet to be fulfilled, God offered reassurance to them.

Similarly, at times when it was difficult for me to believe his promises, God sent reassurances my way. Bible verses, songs, encouraging notes, and prayers helped to reassure me that God was still at work—even if circumstances hadn't yet changed. Whatever you are trusting God for, draw strength from the encouragements he gives along the way.

God Almighty, you know how we struggle to be faithful. Reassure us of your presence and power, reminding us that nothing is impossible with you. Amen.

SEALING THE DEAL

"You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you."
—Genesis 17:11

Over the years, God gave Abraham an armful of promises. God even invited Abraham into a special covenantal relationship. And now God asks Abraham to reciprocate. Abraham is to accept this covenantal relationship by means of a ceremony called circumcision. Abraham and his descendants will receive a permanent mark on their bodies—an ongoing reminder that they belong, body and soul, to their God.

The ceremony also symbolizes that they belong not only to God but also to each other. Circumcision was an initiation rite into the family of God, with participants considered part of God's chosen people. The ceremony spoke of both ownership and identity. It also symbolized the need for cutting or casting off all forms of unrighteousness in order to be

wholly devoted to God. This covenant was to be sealed by the shedding of blood.

Today we still use symbols as powerful reminders of who we are and the promises we make. When two people enter the sacred covenant of marriage, they often seal their promises with a kiss and with wedding rings, declaring that they belong to each other. And in a way like circumcision for God's Old Testament saints, the baptism of New Testament saints is a powerful reminder of our unity and identity in Christ.

Father God, thank you for your gracious covenantal love. May it never cease to amaze us. May it transform us more and more into the image of your Son, our Savior. Amen.

MARKED BY THE WATERS OF BAPTISM

In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands . . . having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him. . . .

—Colossians 2:11-12

The Bible tells one consistent story of God's gracious dealings with his people. Beginning with Abraham, God invites them into a special relationship with him. The Old Testament sign of this covenantal bond was the rite of circumcision. In the New Testament the church has received baptism in Christ as the sign of belonging in God's covenant. Participation is no longer limited to Jewish males but is now open to all who believe in Christ as Savior.

The waters of baptism mark a person's life—letting them know who they are and to whom they belong. This God-ordained sacrament is a channel of blessing, a means of grace, a way of assuring us of God's promises. Through baptism God makes promises to us. He signs and seals his covenant with us, his children. Our

faith is confirmed and strengthened by our participation in it.

Colossians 2 teaches that the rite of circumcision pointed forward to the day when Jesus' own blood would be shed for us. Because of his once-for-all sacrifice, the shedding of blood is no longer required. Instead, water now becomes the symbol of both death and resurrection in Christ, forever binding us with the promises of God. If you have not yet done so, there is no better time than right now to believe and be baptized to new life.

Lord Jesus, your amazing grace invites us into your story and your victory over sin for us. Help us to live faithfully for you. Amen.

THE RIGHT KIND OF LAUGHTER

Abraham . . . laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" . . . Sarah laughed. . . . —Genesis 17:17; 18:12

Not all laughter is good medicine. There is a kind of laughter that mocks and wounds. It's the laughter of disdain and derision. Being laughed at is no fun.

However, laughing alongside good friends can bring healing. This is a kind of joyful laughter that accompanies celebrations: the laughter of wonder, amusement, and amazement.

On two different occasions, we read of laughter breaking out after God's announcement that a child would be born to aged Sarah and Abraham. In Genesis 17, we read that Abraham laughs, and in the next chapter Sarah laughs too. This was a laughter of astonishment and amazement mingled with a hint of disbelief. They weren't necessarily laughing at God, but more at a plan that seemed so implausible. God

had been faithful to them, but they weren't quite sure they believed God would do the impossible. But then the child of promise was eventually born the next year, and they named him *Isaac*, meaning "laughter" (Genesis 21:1-7). Their laughter of doubt was transformed into a laughter of celebration and praise.

Where do you see God at work in astonishing ways today? Consider how this can bring a sense of joy and celebration to people around you.

God of amazing grace and joy, cast out our doubts and fears. Turn our mourning into dancing, our weeping into laughter. Help us to trust that you will make all things new. Amen.

INTERCESSION: POWER TO CHANGE LIVES

"Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city?"

—Genesis 18:23-24

Prayer doesn't stop with making requests for ourselves. It reaches out to include others. That's why, with great intensity, Paul could say, "I urge . . . that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people. . . . This is good, and pleases God" (1 Timothy 2:1-3). God works through intercession—prayer for others—to do mighty things. We can pray powerfully to God for others—and when we need prayer, with others pleading our cause before the Almighty, that can be a powerful experience.

Abraham's visitors informed him that Sodom and Gomorrah were about to be destroyed. Knowing that his nephew Lot was in danger there, Abraham pleaded with God to spare the city if even fifty, or forty, or thirty, or twenty, or even ten righteous people lived there. And God said he would spare

the city if even so few righteous people were there.

This episode demonstrates the powerful impact of intercessory prayer. It's as if the intercessor has one hand reaching out to a needy, broken world, and the other hand reaching up to the gracious God—linking them together. Intercession gives us an opportunity to partner with God in accomplishing his work. When we intercede for others, we come close to the heart of Jesus, the great intercessor (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25).

Father, thank you for the privilege of prayer. May we seek to be conduits of your grace, interceding for others so that your presence and power may fill their lives. Amen.

GOD'S WARNING SIGNS

In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah . . . serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.

—Jude 7

Every caring parent has warned their child about the dangers of playing near a busy street or in some other hazardous place. Young children are often unaware of danger, so they need to be warned. Our heavenly Father responds similarly when his children are sometimes careless. Thoughts of them perishing so stirs his heart that he sends warning signals our way. The dreadful destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah serves as one of those warning signs.

The events described in Genesis 19 give us a small window into the godless depravity of these cities. Two heavenly messengers, sent to warn Lot about Sodom, said, "The outcry to the LORD against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it." Having rejected God long ago, these cities no longer had any moral or social conscience.

The tragic truth about human nature is that the worse we get, the less we realize it. We can become like a skunk that gives off a putrid smell but is not offended by it at all. People entrapped in sin are often oblivious to their own moral stench. May the fate of these ancient cities serve as a solemn warning of the consequences of trying to live our own way without regard for God or his way.

Lord, have mercy on us. We are attracted by sin but are often blind to its many dangers. May we heed your warnings, keeping our eyes fixed on you—the author and perfecter of faith. Amen.

TIME TO RUN

One of them said, "Flee for your lives! Don't look back . . . ! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!" —Genesis 19:17

Genesis 19 tells the tragic story of Abraham's nephew Lot. Until the arrival of two heavenly messengers, Lot was oblivious to the danger around him. He had gotten so close to sin and evil that he had lost perspective. Lot was a God-fearing man, but he had a divided heart. He loved the Lord, but he also loved the things of the world. Lot tried to serve two masters. But in the end he lost everything that mattered to him.

Failure in the Christian life is seldom the result of a sudden blowout. Most often it is the result of a slow leak. It usually involves a gradual drifting away from God and into sin, as was the case with Lot. He and his family were so torn by their divided loyalties that the heavenly messengers had to lead them by hand out of the city before destruction rained down.

God's exhortation still stands: flee from evil! Flee, before evil gets its claws so deeply embedded into you that you are unable to break free. Running from sin is not the mark of a coward, but yielding to sin is. It takes guts to admit our vulnerability and to flee from sin's overwhelming power. There is a high price in choosing to follow Jesus—but an even higher price in not choosing to follow him.

Lord, our hearts are often divided. We have become so accustomed to sin that we no longer blush. Forgive us. Purify us. Make us wholly yours. May we run to you whenever we are overwhelmed. Amen.

REMEMBERING LOT'S WIFE

"The day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down. . . . It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. . . . Remember Lot's wife!"
—Luke 17:29-32

"Remember Lot's wife!" Even though this is one of the shortest statements in the Bible, it packs a wallop. It offers a solemn warning about choosing foolishly. Lot's family is given clear instructions: Sodom is about to be destroyed, so head for the hills and don't look back. But, tragically, Lot's wife cannot resist looking back. She steals a peak and is turned into a pillar of salt. She is frozen in time at the moment of her disobedience, a monument to the dangers of spiritual compromise.

Most societies memorialize significant achievements in some way. We build statues to honor war heroes, great leaders, and athletes. But what do we do with figures of failure and ruin? They are embarrassing rather than inspirational, so we keep them out of sight. God, however, is so concerned with our

spiritual well-being that he immortalizes failure. Through the story of Lot's wife, the Lord calls generations to remember the high cost of sin.

It breaks God's heart to see his children fall into disgrace because temptation has gotten the best of them. Although the sin may be forgiven, often the scars and collateral damage last a long time. That's why he says, "Remember Lot's wife"—who held on too tightly to the things of this world.

Lord, forgive us for holding on to worldly desires and failing to obey you fully. Guide us to follow you. Amen.

HOME-GROWN BELIEVERS

When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him.
—Genesis 21:4

The long-awaited son finally arrived. Abraham and Sarah were overjoyed at Isaac's birth. Yet this stunning birth came with new responsibilities, which Abraham took seriously. First, he circumcised Isaac, as God commanded. And as Isaac grew, Abraham instructed his son in the ways of the Lord (see Genesis 18:19). Later Abraham also helped to find the right woman for Isaac to marry (Genesis 24). Despite his advanced age, Abraham diligently worked to share his faith in God with the next generation.

God instituted the home to be an environment where children can be raised to grow in faith: warmed by God's love, nurtured in his Word, and protected from influences that would damage or destroy. Like tender vegetation, children are especially vulnerable and

in need of constant care. This is where godly parents come in—providing an environment that instills faith and encourages spiritual growth. (See also Deuteronomy 6:1-9.)

If we are parents, we can't pass along what we don't have. To pass faith along, we need to have a deep love for God that helps to shape the rhythms of family life. This includes intentional times of spiritual training as well as informal conversations about God and his love as we go about our lives each day.

Father, may we create holy habits that bolster our love for you. Help parents and other family members to plant seeds of faith in children's lives, that you may bring the increase. Amen.

FAITH ON TRIAL

God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and . . . sacrifice him . . . as a burnt offering."

—Genesis 22:2

Abraham's journey of faith involved some painful twists and turns. This episode can tend to leave a knot in nearly every parent's stomach. Here God tests Abraham by telling him to offer up his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice—and Abraham very nearly goes through with it!

The request seems unthinkable—asking Abraham to offer up his own son. After all, this was the son of promise—the one through whom God promised to bless the nations of the world. This command likely made no sense at all to Abraham. Isaac was God's great gift. But now it seemed that this gift was to be given back, surrendered up to God. Could Abraham let go of his son—the one thing that meant more to him than life itself? And what about God's promise to bless the nations through him?

This surely was a challenging, excruciating test of Abraham's faith. But somehow Abraham had learned to trust God enough to provide a solution. He even told Isaac, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And as Abraham was about to slay his son, God told him to stop.

At times our faith may be tested too. Will we trust God to keep his promises, however challenging it may be to obey? Through Jesus, God's only Son, who laid down his life for our sake, we can trust God with the outcome.

Lord, give us deeply trusting faith in you. Help us to know that you will see us through every trial we encounter. Amen.

TESTING OUR FAITH

"Do not lay a hand on the boy. . . . Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."
—Genesis 22:12

Abraham's faith is severely tested in this episode. How it must have pained him to look into the face of the son he loved so dearly, knowing that this long-promised child was to become a sacrifice. Yet Abraham trusted that God would somehow make a way when there seemed to be no way out. Abraham displayed a surprising, unshakeable faith in the almighty, good God, who keeps his promises.

Here God put Abraham to the ultimate test of faith. God needed to know who really held first place in Abraham's heart. And Abraham needed to know that God could be completely trusted. For this reason Abraham was asked to surrender his most precious treasure to God.

What is your most precious treasure? What might you

be holding on to because it's more important to you than life itself? My guess is that it's probably a very good thing. But if a good thing becomes a distraction that pulls you away from God, it can become an idol, and that is a bad thing.

Sometimes God has to do the painful work of prying our fingers off that treasure so that we can give back to him what belongs to him in the first place. Nothing is truly safe or secure until it is surrendered and dedicated to God.

Father, help us to release our treasures into your hands. May we hold loosely what you have given us while holding tightly to you. Guide us to find our true joy in you. Amen.

THE LORD PROVIDES

Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram. . . . He . . . took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.
—Genesis 22:13

Abraham's faith is tested with the ultimate challenge: Is he willing to give up his most precious treasure to God? And at the last possible moment, God intervenes, telling Abraham to stop. So Isaac is spared, delivered from a death sentence. And God provides a substitute, a sacrificial ram to be offered instead. The place is then called "The LORD Will Provide."

Abraham could not have known that about 2,000 years later an even greater sacrifice would be made. God would again provide a substitute, who actually became "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). That substitute was Jesus, God's only Son, who gave up his own life to pay for all our sin so that all who believe in him may have eternal life (John 3:16).

God's judgment against sin fell on his own Son. Jesus, the sacrificial Lamb, stepped in and took our place. On that day, through Jesus' death on a cross outside Jerusalem, a sufficient sacrifice was provided (see Mark 15:33-39).

Abraham could not have known all this, but by the grace of God he had received the gift of faith and could trust that God would somehow keep his promises.

Lamb of God, thank you for being our substitute and dying in our place, opening the way for us to be saved. Give us faith to believe in you and to serve you every day. Amen.

A LIFE WITH GOD

Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people.

—Genesis 25:8

It's not how fast we run the journey of life that counts, but how we run it. The object is to follow the Lord, who calls and leads us. The point is to live God's way, trusting him with our destiny rather than charging ahead and doing life our own way.

God called Abraham on a journey of faith that took him many hundreds of miles and lasted throughout his many years. Abraham died at the age of 175 and was buried with his wife Sarah. Though Abraham hadn't always acted faithfully on this journey, God was always his faithful guide. Abraham eventually learned that he could trust God with everything in his life. In faith, he grew to trust that he could always depend on God to keep his promises.

Many people come to the end of their life and look

back with regret and remorse rather than fulfillment and joy. Abraham had his share of both. Ultimately, because of God, he could look back over his many years and be grateful, joyful, and satisfied. Abraham had become a believer in God. He had learned that God can be trusted fully. He had seen promises fulfilled and amazing deliverances. He had discovered that the real adventure of life is in following God's call.

May we, too, run the race of faith as God calls us and, in the end, enjoy the fulfillment of God's promises.

Lord, be our ever-true guide on this journey of faith. May we trust in you and find ways to share this faith with the people around us. Amen.

KEEP ON BELIEVING

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. . . . —Hebrews 11:13

In Abraham's remarkable life, his faith in God is what stands out. Throughout the course of his ups and downs and his moves to various places, Abraham believed. He not only believed God existed, but he was willing to stake his future on God's faithfulness. Abraham believed, even though there was no cloud of witnesses around to support him or spur him on (Hebrews 11:1-2).

Abraham had some amazing adventures along the way. But every act of worship and following God's call was motivated out of faith. Faith was not a one-time expression for him but a life-long experience. Although Abraham's faith wavered at times, it never collapsed. Against all odds, he kept on trusting in God's promises. God gave him the gift of faith, and Abraham believed.

The Chinese bamboo plant barely grows during its first five years. For a long time, nothing seems to be happening. Then, during the fifth year, the plant can grow more than 50 feet. God's work in our lives can be like that, taking a long time to develop and then bursting with visible growth. Yet this growth won't happen unless we are patient and keep on believing. And with God's leading, we can do that.

Father, as you work out your good plan in our lives, help us to exercise patient, unwavering confidence in you. Amen.

EYES ON THE PRIZE

He was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.
—Hebrews 11:10

From the time he received God's call, Abraham became a sojourner. He lived in tents and frequently moved around. While Abraham appreciated the blessings of God, he came to realize that everything on this earth is temporary. Everything has an expiration date. Over the years Abraham grew in perspective. He began to desire an even greater reward that comes by faith—an eternal home “whose architect and builder is God.”

Abraham didn't live long enough to see all of God's promises fulfilled. Neither do any of us. Yet throughout his life, Abraham kept moving forward, following after God. By faith, he knew that the best was yet to come. He looked forward to enjoying life with God in a city that God would build—a reference to the New Jerusalem (see Revelation 21-22). Abraham came to be-

lieve that the promised land was more than a plot of dirt in the land of Canaan. It was not only a place where Abraham and his descendants could live but also a place where God's Spirit dwells in all his glory. Abraham believed in having life with God in heaven, and that made all the difference while he was here on earth.

We too live as sojourners on this earth. We experience partial fulfillments of God's promises. And, like Abraham, we keep our eyes on the glorious prize that awaits us someday—when Jesus will return and make all things new.

Lord Jesus, we can get so distracted in this world. Help us to look forward to life with you in your kingdom when it fully comes. Amen.



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