

The Journey of Faith
(7) The God who Encourages Us
Genesis 17:1-27
Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers

There is meaning to Life

In one of the gardens around the Royal Shakespeare Theatre is a monument engraved with four quotes from Shakespeare. One, from Macbeth, reads:

*Life's but a walking shadow,
A poor player
that struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
and then is heard no more*

Is that all human life amounts to? A walking shadow? An actor on a stage for just one short hour, who then disappears forever? The full quote is even more depressing:

*A tale told by an idiot,
full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

The story of Abraham teaches us otherwise! Abraham was loved by God, called by God and he walked with God. His life was filled with the plans and promises of God. And all of his life, we read in Hebrews 11 he was “looking forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.” (Hebrews 11:10) For the one who trusts God - and for us that means, through Jesus Christ - life is filled with joyful meaning and future hope!

This special moment in Abraham's Life

This morning we've arrived at a special moment in Abraham's life, when one of God's promises, the promise to make him into a great nation was on the verge of being fulfilled. We last met him after the birth of Ishmael when he was 86 years old (16:16) now he's 99 (17:1) Why has the divine author missed out 13 years of Abraham's story? To teach us that there are seasons of a believer's life—even long seasons—that seem humdrum and ordinary? Stretches when nothing of note appears to take place; no visions, no signs, no miracles, no visible advances?

Does some listener resonate with Abraham's silent years? It's been the same old same old, for years you say? If so, remember that our walk with the Lord is always supernatural if it is only marked by ordinary trust in God, for faith itself is a supernatural gift—to believe in a God we cannot see and to walk by faith rather than sight, is a daily miracle! And remember that some of God's deepest works in the human soul are done in the quiet years: when the bulb is developing beneath the soil, hidden from human eyes. For example, God may be forming the vital grace of perseverance or stickability in you. Diamonds cannot be rushed.

What do we know about Abraham's life in these 13 years?

We know he's waiting for God's great promises to be fulfilled, promises given some 24 years ago. A vast nation would come from Abraham—Israel—and a land in which they could dwell would be given to them. Not a square metre of land and no great nation yet! (Oh, yes, there is little Ishmael growing up in the home, now a strapping lad of 13 years), but there's a question mark over him, is there not?

We also know that Abraham is wondering, wondering how the "Ishmael plan" will work itself out. Will the lad born of Hagar, not Sarah, become the promised son? Or is there another to come?

Abraham loved his son Ishmael, but we know from chapter 21 that there were simmering tensions in Sarah's heart towards both Hagar and Ishmael. What's going to happen to my much loved son Ishmael? How is the promise going to unfold?

Are we wrong to suppose that Abraham is also weary, as well as waiting and wondering? Waiting can be wearisome! And especially when there are big question marks over the future—and when the possibility of the promise becoming fulfilled through ageing Abraham and Sarah becomes less credulous by the year!

Abraham is waiting, wondering and weary. What happens next? Well, God comes to Abraham and encourages him: fortifies him, fills him with strength. When we are waiting wondering and weary, God comes to us and encourages us. And Abraham responds with faith and obedience.

(1) God Encourages Abraham

The Lord knows our hearts, he knows how much we can take and he has promised that, “he will not let us be tempted beyond what we can bear but will provide a way out so that we can stand up under it.” (1 Corinthians 10:13). How does God encourage Abraham?

God encourages Abraham with an outward sign. God gives to Abraham a sign which will be a perpetual reminder of the promises he has made, the sign of circumcision. “You are to undergo circumcision and it will be the sign of the covenant between you and me” (17:11)

Every time it rains, Noah wonders—will this downpour destroy the world again? God puts a rainbow in the sky to assure him, comfort him and remind him of his promise, “I will never destroy the earth again with a flood.”

Abraham wonders if the promise to become a great nation will ever be fulfilled, and God gives him a sign to remind him, “I will keep my promise, you will become a great nation.”

We should note that the sign of circumcision was only for males, verse 10, not females; it was normally performed on the 8th day, not at puberty which is what happened in other nations; and it is not applicable to New Covenant believers. Some false teachers went about in NT days saying that Christians should be circumcised, but Paul answered: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” (Galatians 5:6)

We don’t have circumcision, but God has given us the signs of baptism and communion to encourage us.

Baptism is an outward sign, a reminder, of the inward miracle the Lord has worked in our lives, so when we wonder if we really belong to the Lord we can look back and say “Yes I do, because on such and such a day I was baptised.”

A fellow pastor friend of mine told me that he had observed over decades that believing children who had been baptised before they hit the teens remained faithful through those uncertain years. He pondered why? Whenever they wavered and wondered “Can I really be a Christian with all these battles and doubts?” they could answer back, “Well yes, I am, because I was baptised on such and such a date.” Baptism was an anchor in the choppy waters of young adulthood.

So may I ask everyone here, have you been baptised? If you believe in Jesus, get baptised, it will strengthen your faith!

God has also given communion to encourage us, is a reminder, a sign that we really are forgiven through the cross of Jesus Christ, “This is the new Covenant, the new promise” in my blood, says Jesus to us each time we take the bread and wine. “I don’t feel forgiven, I am such a poor Christian” - Satan assails all of us with those kinds of doubts. Communion reminds us

that he loves us, that we belong to him, that our sins have been paid for! If you want to be encouraged, don't miss communion!

"Abraham needs encouraging —I will give him a physical sign of the promise I have made to him."

God also encourages Abraham with a new name, "No longer will you be called Abram (which means exalted father); your name will be called Abraham (which means father of many) for I have made you a father of many nations." (verse 5) Sarah's name is also changed, though both versions of it mean "Princess."

Names are important, they identify us today; back then they also pointed to their destiny! "Abraham you have a new destiny, You are the father of nations." What an encouragement!

In Christ Jesus we too have new names to fortify us. We may be without father and mother in this world, but we are children of God. We may feel our unworthiness, but we are saints made holy through Jesus Christ. We may be nobodies in the eyes of the world but we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation (1 Peter 2).!

Our true identity, brothers and sisters, is not in the secondary attributes of our lives, such as our age, education, employment, colour, gender or sexuality, our true identities are in Christ Jesus and what he has done for us!

The third way God encouraged weary Abraham was to revealed a little more of himself and his plans to him. For the very first time, God revealed himself by the name "El-Shaddai" or "The Lord Almighty." Abraham I am the almighty God. "Remember that when I tell you impossible things are going to happen to you! With me nothing is impossible." And for the very first time God told Abraham, that Sarah was going to be the mother of the promised child, "I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her." (16) Now Abraham knows—for sure—that the promised child would come from him and Sarah, no doubt about it!

Isn't this how God encourages us too? He pulls back the curtain to reveal a little more of his good future plan for our lives, a little more of his power, his ability to provide for all our needs. When we start out, we know but a little, but over the years, the Lord reveals more of himself and more of his plans.

What does God do for his waiting, wondering and weary child, Abraham? He encourages him, and here is the most important thing I am going to say this morning: all of God's encouragements come through his words. God talks to Abraham, speaks to Abraham, right throughout this chapter! When we are waiting, wondering and weary, God wants to encourage us too, and the way he does it is exactly the same way as he did it with Abraham, through his Word, through the Scriptures.

What was the most encouraging feature of last weekend's church staycation? The fellowship, the worship, the food, the fun? All of these things did us a world of postpandemic good! But the most encouraging feature of last weekend were the three occasions when God's Word was preached to us through our brother Chris Brauns.

That's why we flew him all the way from America last weekend. Not because he's a friend of mine or a friend of the church. But to encourage us through the preaching of God's Word. And it was worth every penny of the airline ticket—which by the way was kindly paid for by the friends of Red Brick Church, Stillman Valley, Illinois.

How are we strengthened by the Lord? Through the Word, read, preached, shared, in the power of the Spirit who first inspired it.

Now, and very briefly, after God encouraged waiting wondering weary Abraham with his words, Abraham responded in Faith and Obedience.

(2) Abraham Believes God

Abraham laughs a laugh of belief! Remember this is the first time Abraham knows, for sure that Sarah will be the mother of the child of promise. Remember this is the first time Ishmael, that much loved lad, but son of Hagar, has been ruled out, for sure. So this announcement is not only the declaration of a promise fulfillment, it's the death of a wrong dream. So much to take in! This is not a laugh of unbelief—as Sarah's was in the next chapter! (Sarah's laugh is rebuked by the Lord, Abraham's is not). This laugh is what might happen when we hear the amazing but incredulous news and we are filled with joy and amazement and a dozen other emotions. Abraham believed God's Word, as incredible as it may have seemed. "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations." (Romans 4:18)

When God encourages us through his Word, let us believe what he says.

(3) Abraham Obeys God

And proof that Abraham believes is that he obeys. Faith and obedience are twins, wherever the one is found, so is the other. One can think of fewer more painful commands, some brother is saying under his breath! Verse 23- "on that day." Not, I'll get around to it one day, procrastination, delay, dither or postponement, but that very day. Has the Lord been speaking to you about something and you've been putting it off? Abraham obeys right away.

When you and I are waiting, wondering and weary, the Lord will encourage us through his Word. And when he does, may we believe it and respond in loving obedience, without delay. Amen.