

7.11.21 God Wants a Relationship With You Genesis 12.1-9, Hebrews 11.8-12

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I'm performing numerous weddings this summer and I can tell you people meet in different ways. Some meet at college, others through friends, and some online. Because I've been married almost 32 years, I'm unfamiliar with online dating apps, except for what people tell me about their experience or what I read. I hear that people create profiles, about swiping right and left, and at least one app makes it mandatory that women initiate conversation after matching. I share this with you because it reflects how important relationships are to people. The Bible is kind of like a profile, created by God's Spirit working through people, in the hopes of creating a desire in you for a relationship with God. Granted this makes for a much longer "profile" than you'd find online. **God wants a relationship with you, and you can choose to have a relationship with God.** That's why Christian writer G. K. Chesterton said, ***"Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair."***

In many ways, the Book of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, is about God's invitation to relationship and how people respond to God's offer to be in a relationship of love, trust, and obedience with the Lord. Adam, Eve, and their son Cain fail to respond properly to God's call. Noah does a little better. Abraham and Sarah, who had their times of disobedience, failure, and doubt, end up going down in history being associated with responding in faith to God's invitation. Listen to **Genesis 12.1-9**

"Now the Lord said to Abram, **"Go from *your* country and *your* kindred and *your* father's house** to the land that ***I will show you.*** ² ***I will make of you*** a great nation, and ***I will bless you,*** and make your name great, **so that you will be a blessing.** ³ ***I will bless*** those who **ble**ss**** you, and the one who curses you ***I will curse;*** **and in you *all the families of the earth shall be blessed.***"

⁴ **So Abram went, as the Lord had told him;** and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵ Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; **and they set forth to go** to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷

Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, *“To your offspring I will give this land.”* **So he built there an altar to the Lord**, who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there **he moved on** to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and **there he built an altar to the Lord** and invoked the name of the Lord. ⁹ And Abram **journeyed on by stages** toward the Negeb.”

Beginning in Genesis 11:27 we learn that Abram and Sarai were from Ur, which is in southern Iraq, then, they moved northwest to Haran, which is in Turkey, just north of the Syrian border. Genesis 12 begins with Abraham hearing a mysterious voice telling them to pull up stakes and move into an unknown future. God didn't tell them exactly where they were going or what sort of life to expect when they arrived at their destination. The Voice was not terribly specific about the details, but even without knowing the details they loaded up the camels and they moved south to Canaan. We admire their kind of faith that hears and obeys. We want it for ourselves. Unfortunately for them and for us that wasn't the end of the story. As they move into Canaan, God promises to give this land to their children (they don't have any yet), but the land isn't fabulous, it's experiencing a famine, so they journey on to Egypt. The bad news there is that Abraham didn't trust God enough to tell the truth, so he lied and said his wife was his sister, to save himself (putting her at risk with the Pharaoh who took her as *his* wife). God is faithful even when we're not and bails out Abraham and Sarah and they emerge safely from Egypt.

The chapters in Genesis devoted to Abraham have two prominent themes: **how God acts toward Abraham and how Abraham acts toward God**. A pattern emerges: **God makes promises; Abraham and Sarah have trouble believing and waiting for the promises**. God promises to make Abram a great nation, to bless him, to make his name great, to bless those who bless him and curse those who curse him, God promises to give him land, and an heir. The difficulty Abraham and Sarah have is one we frequently share – **they can't wait for God's promises, so they take matters into their own hands**. When we take matters into our own hands because we know better than anyone else, including God, how to do what God wants done, we often end up making a mess. After 10 years of being promised a child and nothing happening Abram and Sarai tire of tests and empty promises, so they take it upon themselves to come up

with their own plan. Sarai suggests Abram try to produce an heir for them with her enslaved Egyptian woman Hagar. In a revealing verse (Genesis 16:2) we're told, "*And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.*" While generally it's good to listen to one's spouse, it wasn't this time. He should have been listening to God's voice.

What was the consequence of Abram listening to Sarai? A child was conceived, but so was big trouble. His wife became jealous and then furious with both her husband and with Hagar who Sarai wants sent away. An angel of the Lord appears to Hagar in the wilderness and tells her to call her son Ishmael, which means "*God hears,*" because the Lord heard her cries and those of her son. **Hagar and Ishmael represent the temptation you face to have faith in your own powers rather than in the promise of God. Thirteen more years go by**, still no child for Abram and Sarai and they aren't getting any younger. Can God be trusted or not? Will God deliver on what was promised? Have you ever waited and wondered how long, O Lord?

Genesis 17:1-8, 15-21 says, "When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; **walk before me and be blameless.** And ***I will make*** my covenant between me and you, and ***will make*** you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my **covenant** with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. **No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. *I will make you*** exceedingly fruitful; and ***I will make*** nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ***I will establish*** my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an **everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.** And **I give to you**, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and ***I will be their God.***"

"As for Sarah your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. *I will bless her*, and moreover ***I will give you a son*** by her. ***I will bless her***, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." Then Abraham fell on his face **and laughed**, and said to himself, "*Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?*" And Abraham said to God, "*O that Ishmael might live in your sight!*" God said, "No, but your wife

Sarah shall bear you a son, and **you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant** with him as an **everlasting covenant** for his offspring after him. As for **Ishmael**, I have heard you; **I will bless him** and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and **I will make him** a great nation. But **my covenant I will establish with Isaac**, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.”

Receiving a new name as Abraham and Sarah do is a sign God is setting them apart to do something special. God is consecrating them to be the ancestors of a multitude of nations and the bearers of a special relationship with God through which all people will be blessed. If you're God and your task was to create a whole new nation, would you begin with a 75-year-old man and his barren 66-year-old wife? Especially when you'll be asking these folks to live in tents, move repeatedly, possess a land, and have more descendants than you can count? Get serious. Yet God begins with people, now 99 and 90 years old, who are in old age and barren, which means from a human point of view – **people with no future**. God wants to have a relationship even and especially with people who seem to have no future and no hope. You can choose to have a relationship with God even and especially when you're feeling hopeless.

God's future is shaped through people who humanly have no future. One of the major messages of the Bible is that human hopelessness doesn't necessarily have the last word. The last word always belongs to God; whose life-giving grace and power can overcome any obstacles, including old age and barrenness when it comes to producing a child. Abraham and Sarah were without potential, they lacked the physical ability to do what God was promising to do through them. There was no fertility clinic for them to go to, no little blue pills to take, if they were going to have a child it was going to be nothing short of miraculous. God uses a couple like this so that when God's promise is fulfilled there can be no claiming of credit for success, the praise and the glory belong to God alone.

Like Abraham and Sarah, you can choose to have a relationship with God and to walk with God seeking to be blameless, to live a life of integrity, trust, and obedience. **As they journey on in life, Abraham and Sarah, like you, continue to learn the important lesson that faith is difficult; faith demands obedience, perseverance,**

and trust even when the available evidence gives reason for doubt. And as the scripture says, **they journey on by stages**, as do you toward the horizon and the unseen future that's to come.

Abraham and Sarah must overcome the temptation to rely on the son, Ishmael, they already possess as an alternative to God's promise. Abraham prays in his desperation and heartache that Ishmael "*might live in*" God's sight (Genesis 17:18).

Agreeing to answer that prayer and to bless Ishmael reveals that God's concern is not limited to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. God promised Abraham and Sarah they would become the ancestors of a multitude of nations and today Abraham and Sarah are significant to Christians, Jews, and Muslims. God establishes a covenant, a relationship, with Abraham that has implications in our time.

Both Abraham and Sarah laugh when they hear that a 99-year-old man and his 90-year-old wife are going to have a baby. Like them, you can doubt God's power, be impatient, be controlling and take matters into your own hands to try and manipulate people and events to make things come out the way you think they should. This rarely turns out as well as having faith in and trusting God even when it may appear illogical, against your previously held notions, convictions, or beliefs, or crazy, and downright silly. The promise that confronts Abraham and Sarah exceeds and defies their expectations and the available evidence. God tells them to name the child they end up having, "*Isaac*," which is Hebrew for "*he laughs*," as a reminder that often the joke and the joy is on us when we have faith and trust the Lord.

Frederick Buechner sums it up well, "Why did the two old crocks laugh? They laughed because they knew only a fool would believe that a woman with one foot in the grave was soon going to have her other foot in the maternity ward. They laughed because God expected them to believe it anyway. They laughed because God seemed to believe it. They laughed because they half believed it themselves. They laughed because laughing felt better than crying. They laughed because if by some crazy chance it just happened to come true they would really have something to laugh about, and in the meanwhile it helped keep them going.

"Sarah and her husband had had plenty of hard knocks in their time, and there were plenty more of them still to come, but at that moment when the angel told them

they'd better start dipping into their old age pensions for cash to build a nursery, the reason they laughed was that it suddenly dawned on them that **the wildest dreams they'd ever had hadn't been half wild enough.**"¹

Hearing and obeying God's voice isn't easy. Thomas a Kempis wrote in *The Imitation of Christ* (p. 95), "**Blessed are the ears that catch the pulses of the divine whisper, and give no heed to the whisperings of the world.**" To hear God's divine whisper requires turning your attention from the voices of the world that would keep you in constant conflict and fear, as well as the doubting voices that arise from your own heart and mind. Whose voice are you listening to? **God's divine whisper speaks of someone we can love for a lifetime, something lasting to believe in, and something eternal to look forward to.**

You can choose to have a relationship with God. God wants to have a relationship with you. That relationship **requires obedience, perseverance, and trust even when the available evidence gives reason for doubt.** Just as Abraham and Sarah "*journey on by stages,*" so do we. There are parts of our journey of life and faith we don't get to choose and don't want to be on. We want some challenges to end. We want our body to stop betraying us. We need to learn to pray when it's hardest to pray; to trust when it's hardest to trust, believing God is with us. A journey implies changes, transitions, challenges, and adventures and hopefully traveling companions who are with us at different parts of our journey and bless and enrich our life. God is the one who will stay with us all the way.

Prayer: God of Abraham and Sarah, of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, thank you for inviting us to be in relationship with you. Inspire us to be willing to try new adventures and to dare new risks; deliver us from comfort and complacency and purge us from the temptation to listen to other voices more than your own. We thank you for the support of family and friends who encourage us in our faith. Help all of us where we are being challenged on our journeys of faith and may we learn the lessons you are seeking to teach us and emerge with deeper obedience, greater trust, and fuller love for you and your children. In Jesus' name. Amen.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 25. *Peculiar Treasures* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 153.

Blessing: 1 John 5:3-4

“For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.

And his commandments are not burdensome,
for whatever is born of God conquers the world.

And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.”

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. If God asked you, as God asked Abraham and Sarah, to move out of the country you live in and away from your family and your home, what would you find most difficult about making that move (leaving your family, having to learn a new language, being unfamiliar with the culture, food, music, currency etc.)?
2. How would you respond to God telling you to go somewhere without knowing the destination?
3. In the story of Abraham and Sarah, a pattern emerges: God makes promises; Abraham and Sarah have trouble having faith and waiting for the promises. Why is it difficult to hold on to hope and waiting in faith as time passes and you don't see God acting?
4. Some people today equate faith with belief, the Bible equates faith with obedience. How can the story of Abraham and Sarah help you journey onward in obedience and trust?
5. In the New Testament book of Hebrews, Abraham and Sarah are remembered for their faith (see Hebrews 11:8-12). In what part(s) of your life is your faith being put to the test?
6. What hope or encouragement do you find in Abraham and Sarah's story?