

Old Testament Survey - Part 8

by Dick Woodward

This sermon explores the significance of Abraham's faith journey as depicted in Genesis, emphasizing God's promises and the importance of our responses to Him.

Duration: 26:57

Scripture: Genesis 12:7, Genesis 13:18, Genesis 16:1-2, Genesis 21:1-3, Genesis 22:2, Genesis 22:13, Matthew 22:37, Romans 12:1, Hebrews 11:6

Topics: "Faith And Trust", "Old Testament"

Description

This sermon delves into the story of Abraham in the book of Genesis, highlighting the importance of faith in pleasing God and the journey of surrendering everything to Him. It explores the significance of building altars as symbols of response, repentance, relationship, and reality in one's walk with God, emphasizing the need to prioritize God above all else and trust in His plans.

Transcript

In this session, I would like for us to continue surveying the book of Genesis, and as we continue to survey the book of Genesis, I would like for us to come to the largest section of the book of Genesis, which has to do with three Bible characters, Abraham, Jacob and Joseph. Some time ago, the editors of Time magazine decided that people would read Time magazine if they reported the news to us in terms of how the news has affected the lives of people. They still call that people in the news.

People are interested in people, and so the editors of Time magazine felt that if they reported the news to us in terms of how it affects the lives of people, people would read their magazine. Well, long before there was a Time magazine, God knew that people were interested in people and that this was a good way to communicate. In the book of Genesis, God is very careful about the amount of space he gives to different subjects.

Notice how much space he gives in the description of these Bible characters. This is because God wants to describe something again like it was and like it is. God wants us to understand faith like it was and like it is.

Faith is very, very important. According to the New Testament, Hebrews 11, without faith it's impossible to please God, and without faith you cannot come to God. God certainly wants us to come to him, and he wants us to please him, so he does want us to know about faith.

We cannot really appropriate or apply the salvation of which the Bible speaks without faith, so faith is very important because we are saved by faith, the scripture says. Since faith is so very important and God wants us to understand about faith, he tells us the story of a man named Abraham. This is a beautiful Bible character.

This man is referred to more in the New Testament than any other Bible character. Any time the New Testament wants to talk to you about faith, before it says a sentence or two, it will say, Abraham, because if you want to understand faith, the New Testament says you need to understand this man. This man is the walking definition of faith.

He is the walking illustration of faith. When we first meet him at the end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12, his name is Abram. The name Abram means Father of Many Sons.

This man is 75 years old and he doesn't have any sons, and yet his name means Father of Many Sons. I heard about the definition of an optimist. Somebody said, an optimist is a 75-year-old man who gets married and builds a house near a school.

That's the definition of an optimist. Abraham is this kind of an optimist when you meet him. He is 75, doesn't have any children, but if you met him at a well and he introduced himself and said, My name is Father of Many Sons, if you said, Oh, you must have a lot of children, he would say, No, I don't have any children as a matter of fact, but would you believe if you can number the grains of sand on the beaches of the world or the stars in the heavens, one day you'll be able to number my progeny.

If he said that to you, and he probably would have, you probably would have said, Well, who told you that, old man? And he would have said, God told me. God told me that. Later on, when he is about 90 years old, God changes his name.

He still doesn't have any children, and God changes his name to Abraham, which means Father of Multitudes of Sons, Father of Nations of Sons. Now, if you meet him at the well, you say, Hi, Father of Many Sons, he'll say, I beg your pardon, my name has been changed. Oh, really, what's your name now? Now it's Father of Multitudes of Sons.

And then you'd say, Well, bless your heart, you must have had a son. No, I haven't as a matter of fact. But if you can number the grains of sand on the beaches of the world and the stars in the heavens, one day you'll be able to number my progeny.

He did that for years and years and years. There's one verse in the book of Genesis that's quoted in the 4th chapter of Romans that really sums up Abraham. It says, Abraham believed God, and God counted that as righteousness.

God looked down upon this old man and he said, I told that old man something, and he believed me. I like that. I'm going to consider him a righteous man.

After all, what is a righteous man? God says, This is what I consider a righteous man. I told him something, and he believes it. This man is the walking definition of faith for this reason.

When you have a Bible character in the scripture, when you have the story of a Bible character like this, there are two dimensions in which the story is told. First of all, you have what you might call the Godward side of the story, and then you have what you might call the manward side of the story. It's like two sides of

a coin.

In the case of Abraham, the Godward side of the story is told in the appearances of God to this man. Six or eight times, God appears to him, or God speaks to him. I believe what the scripture means when it says God appeared to him is something like Genesis 3, when God asked that question, Who told you? Remember, we said you don't hear voices when God tells you.

The Hebrew there in Genesis 3 is, Who made you know that? Is it possible for God to make you know something? Of course it is. That's what is called an appearance of God to Abraham. It happens about eight times in the narrative.

If you want to see the Godward side of the story, study the appearances of God to Abraham. You see, if God hadn't caused a bush to burn that wasn't consumed so that a man named Moses turned aside to see why this bush wasn't being burned up, we never would have heard of a man named Moses. God always initiates the relationship.

God always is the first cause in a man coming to know him. Paul will say to us in the New Testament, No man seeks after God. No man seeks after God.

God seeks after man, and when a man looks as if he is seeking after God, he is just responding to the God who is seeking after him. God always initiates the relationship. If you want to see that aspect of the relationship, study the appearances of God to Abraham.

As you read the story, try to figure out why did God appear at this juncture in the man's story? Why did God feel that at this point the man needed another appearance, he needed another revelation? The appearances of God to Abraham will show you the Godward side of the relationship. The manward side of the relationship, or the response of this man Abraham to the God who is appearing to him, comes in the form of the altars that he builds. He builds four altars.

Try to discover, as you read the story of Abraham, what he is saying to God when he builds these altars. For instance, when he comes out of Ur of the Chaldeans and Haran into the land of Canaan in response to the God who has been appearing to him or speaking to him, Stephen tells us in Acts 7 that God appeared to him for a long time before he decided to come out. God was saying to this man, Come out here into the wilderness of Canaan.

Just come to me. We always want to be called to a country or to a church or to an organization. How many of us are just called to God? That's a hard thing to explain, isn't it? You began packing your suitcase and your wife said, Where are you going? And you said, I'm going to God.

Wouldn't you have a problem? Wouldn't you have a problem explaining to people that I'm just going out here in the wilderness because God wants to meet with me? And I don't know where we're going after that, I'm just going to God. That's what God asked this man to do. He asked this man to leave his home country and his father and all his relatives, and he was asking him to do that for a long time, and the man wouldn't do it.

I wonder how long God has been appearing to you, trying to get through to you, trying to draw you and bring you to himself or to some plan he has for your life, and you haven't been responding. It isn't until his father dies that Abraham finally does go out into Canaan in response to the God who has been appearing to him, and he builds his first altar in the plains of Morah. The word Morah means teaching or seeking.

It's the idea that I want to learn, and I believe God will teach me. It's like there's some place I'm supposed to be and I believe God will tell me, and I want to know where that is. I believe the allegory here is too beautiful not to be intended.

That's what the word Morah means, where he builds his first altar. I call that first altar of Abraham the altar of response, because it's built in response to the God who has been appearing to him for some time. When he responds to the God who has been appearing to him, God meets him at that altar, he appears to him there, and so Abraham moves on and he builds another altar.

His second altar is built between two places. It's built between Ai, H-A-I, and Beth-el. In the Hebrew, Beth-el means the house of God.

L-E-L is the word for God, and Beth, B-E-T-H, is the word for house. At this point, God doesn't have a house, so what this word seems to mean is the place where God is, the place where the divine presence of God is. That's Beth-el.

That's over here on the west. Over on the east is this city, H-A-I. In the Hebrew, it means something like death or ruin or misery or destruction, like that song you hear sometimes, gloom, despair and agony on me, deep, dark depression, perfect agony.

It's that kind of a word. In the gospel according to Peanuts, it says, the wages of sin is death. The Bible says the wages of sin is death.

The banquet of consequences that comes as a result of sin is just misery, gloom and despair and agony and all the rest of that. That's what that word, Ai, suggests. Further east beyond Ai is Sodom and Gomorrah.

We all know what that represents. Abraham builds his second altar right smack between those two places. I believe at this second altar, God is responding to what Abraham asked at the first altar.

Abraham said at the first altar, teach me, what do I have to know to be where I'm supposed to be? At the second altar, God answers him, and he says, Abraham, your problem is you're Mr. In-between. Have you ever heard that song that they used to sing back in the dark ages? Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, and don't mess with Mr. In-between. In the scripture, in so many places we're told that.

I would rather you be hot, but if you're not going to be hot, go ahead and be cold. Don't be lukewarm. Elijah challenges the people of God with this question, how long will you be torn between two opinions? If the Lord is God, then follow him, and if Baal is God, then follow him.

In other words, don't try to serve two masters, in the words of Jesus. Don't be Mr. In-between. I call this second altar the altar of repentance.

When people come to God by faith, first they have to respond. That's the beginning. That's just the kick-off.

We put so much emphasis upon the decision to believe, or the decision to begin. Remember, this is important, because as the Chinese say, a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. You do have to respond.

But that's not the whole process. Faith is a journey as much as a destination. It's a process.

All of these caricatures will say that to us. Notice in the interviews of Jesus, Jesus never gave anyone the assurance of salvation until he showed them what repentance meant for them. They had to repent.

They had to think again, which is what that word means, or turn around and go in the opposite direction. When Jesus met people, they were already into things, and in order to follow him, they had to turn away and separate themselves from the past and those things in their past. That's called repentance.

As we see the story of Abraham and we see the definition of faith, we see in these altars first response, that's how it begins, but then repentance. Abraham really struggles at that second altar. When God shows him this, he goes south, right between the two altars, goes down into Egypt, and he's in a tailspin spiritually.

He not only goes south geographically, he goes south spiritually. He's in Egypt, he's out of it. But then he comes back to that same place, and he calls upon the name of the Lord the second time.

Then he calls Lot to him. When Abram came out from his home country there, he was told to leave his father. He couldn't do that.

His father died. That was the catalyst that caused him to leave finally. He was told to forsake all his relatives, but he brought Lot with him, who was his nephew.

His father had a brother named Haran, and Haran had a son named Lot. Haran died, and so Abram adopted Lot. It may be that Lot really loved this nephew, or it may be that he thought that this nephew was God's answer to all these promises God was making.

He might have just been rationalizing and saying, Well, that must be what God means. After all, here's this nephew living right in my home. Maybe he's the heir through whom my progeny will come.

For some reason he couldn't leave Lot. He was supposed to, but he didn't. But after he faced this issue of repentance, he called Lot to himself, and he said, Lot, we've got to separate.

Separate yourself from me, because I'm going to separate myself from you. And it says, Lot moved east toward Ai and ended up living in Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham went west, and he built his third altar at a place called Hebron.

Again, I think this allegory is too beautiful not to be intended. Hebron in Hebrew means communion. When Abram built that third altar, having built the altar of repentance, he was saying to God, God, I want to know you.

All the men of scripture have this great cry, that I might know him. They all cry that out of the depths of their heart, that I might know him. And the more they get to know God, the more they want to know God.

That's what Abraham is saying at that third altar. God, I want to know you. I call this the altar of relationship.

He builds these first three altars in chapters 12 and 13. Just in the first two chapters of his story, he builds these three altars. He doesn't build another altar until he gets to chapter 22.

Once he builds that altar of relationship, he doesn't build any more altars until chapter 22. What is he saying when he builds this third altar, and what's happening after he builds the third altar, between the

third altar and the fourth altar? When he says, God, I want to know you, I think what God is saying to him is, Abraham, if you want to have a relationship with me, I want you to know something. If I'm anything, I'm everything.

Because until you see me as everything, you haven't seen me as anything. I was told that when I was a child. If Jesus Christ is anything, then Jesus Christ is everything, because until Jesus Christ is everything, Jesus Christ isn't anything.

You don't fool around with Jesus. You don't fool around with God. If you really want to know God, God wants to have his rightful place in your life.

Other people were in Abraham's life. Lot, for instance. Lot was a picture of the people we put in our lives that God never wanted there.

How much heartache and grief is caused because we put somebody in our life and God never wanted that person in our life. That's what Lot pictures. Abraham has a son who his Egyptian maid in Genesis 16.

His wife Sarah suggests this, and he listens to his wife. It sounds just like Adam. We get in a lot of trouble when Adam listens to his wife, and we get in a lot of trouble when Abraham listens to his wife, and he has a child through her Egyptian maid named Hagar.

That child is Ishmael, and he is the father of the Arabs. There wouldn't be any Middle East crisis today if Abraham hadn't listened to his wife. But he listened to her, and he had this Ishmael.

Ishmael fathered the Arabs. Now you have Arabs and Jews out there in the Holy Land, and of course that's your problem. There wouldn't be any Arabs out there if he hadn't had Ishmael.

Ishmael, I think, is an illustration of something. The greatest enemy of the best is the good. The greatest enemy of God's best for your life is something good.

In order to get you away from God's will for your life, Satan isn't going to tempt you to go out and rob banks. If God wants you to be a medical missionary, Satan won't tempt you to be a bank robber. He'll just say, You know, we need good physicians here in America.

Why don't you just be a physician here? That's a good thing, to be a physician in America. Well, of course that's a good thing. But if God wants you to be a missionary doctor in Pakistan, then that good thing is the greatest enemy of the best thing.

That's the way Satan works. That's his strategy. He keeps us from God's best by offering us something good, not something awful.

Ishmael is a picture of that. The people in our life who are good, but they're not the best. After that episode in Genesis 16, when Ishmael is born, God appears to Abraham.

This is one of those appearances. Why does he appear to him at this juncture? He says, Abraham, walk before me and be perfect. What he's saying is, Abraham, get it all.

Don't settle for peanuts. My plan isn't like that, through an Egyptian slave named Hagar. My plan is Sarah.

Through Sarah you're going to have a child. I believe Sarah presents another kind of problem in Abraham's relationships. That third altar, the altar of relationship, deals with vertical relationship and horizontal relationship, because they are inseparable.

In order to know God, God has to have his rightful place in all of Abraham's relationships, so he has to speak to him about Lot and get Lot out of his life. He has to work Ishmael out of his life. He finally appears to Abraham and tells him to send Ishmael away.

One by one he's rooting out these people who are competing for first place in Abraham's life. Sarah is a different kind of a problem. Sarah is a picture of those people God does put in our life, and we refuse to recognize it.

How many men take their wives for granted? How many wives take their husbands for granted? How many men spend a lot of their time thinking, Oh, if I just had a better wife, or if I just had that person for my wife, then I could really be spiritual. Or how many women will say, If I just didn't have this man, I could really be a holy, godly woman, and oh, if I could just be married to someone like Billy Graham. They think that way, never realizing perhaps that that man is the man God gave you, that woman is the woman God gave you, and God's plan for your life includes them.

God had to appear to Abraham twice about Sarah. He appeared to Abraham and said, Abraham, it's going to be Sarah. You see, I'm going to change her name, too.

I'm going to change her name from one spelling of Sarah to another. The first spelling meant contentious. A contentious person is a person who is always against it.

Whatever it is you're bringing up, they're against it. Their negative tape starts to play as soon as you start to present something, and they're just always contending or against it. Solomon said, A contentious woman is like a continual dripping on a very rainy day.

It's this drip, drip, drip, drip. Well, Sarah was contentious, and Abraham lived with her a long time. God appeared to him there, and he said, I'm going to change her name to Princess, and she's going to be a mother of nations, just like you're going to be a father of nations, and kings are going to be born from her.

It says Abraham fell on his face and laughed. He just roared, because he was finally getting to believe that God's plan could include him, and he could believe that God could do anything through him, but he didn't believe that plan could include Sarah. Notice how many alternate plans he suggested.

Lot was an alternate. Sarah wasn't necessary if Lot was the heir. In chapter 15 he mentions a servant who lived in his home, and he proposed that this be the heir, and then Ishmael.

He was bypassing Sarah each time, but God confirmed to him, it's going to be through Sarah. When he shared this information with Sarah, Sarah laughed. Finally, when this son is born to Abraham and Sarah, when they're 100 years old, Abraham is 100 and Sarah is 90, you know what God told them to call this kid Isaac, which in Hebrew means laughter, because he never wanted these heroes of faith to forget that they laughed at him when he said he was going to do it.

Just think, every time Sarah called him in for supper, she'd say, Laughter, come on in! And she was reminded every time she did that she laughed at God. And Abraham, who is the hero of faith, he laughed, and every time they called that child by name, God reminded them that they laughed at him. And these

are the heroes of faith.

Finally, Abraham builds that fourth altar, and this is the most important one. He builds it on the mountain of Moriah, which means Jehovah will provide. Up until now, Abraham has picked the location, he's named the sacrifice, he's been calling the shots, but this fourth altar is different.

God picks the place, God names the sacrifice. And you know what God asks as a sacrifice on that fourth altar? Isaac. He asks for that child, that child who was not only the son of Abraham and Sarah's old age, but the vindication of 25 years of faith.

God said, I want him. So Abraham goes up on Mount Moriah, and he fully intends to offer up Isaac. Now, don't get hung up on the fact that he's going to make a human sacrifice, because it's obvious the way the story ends, God never intended for that to happen.

I heard one person say, on Mount Moriah, Abraham didn't offer up Isaac, Abraham offered up Abraham. I call that fourth altar the altar of surrender, or the altar of reality. You know the story.

He's going to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. Just before he and Isaac go up on that mountain, he says to his servants, you stay here with the animals. I and my son are going to go up there and worship, and we will come back to you.

He never doubts that they will both come back. The book of Hebrews, again in the faith chapter, says, he believed that God would raise him from the dead if he did kill him. He had that much faith.

Now, after it happens, he doesn't have to kill his son, there's a ram caught in the thicket, he names that place Jehovah-Jireh, which means in the Hebrew, it shall be proven. The allegory here is so beautiful it has to be intended. What he's saying is this.

When you let God name the mountain, when you let God name the sacrifice, that's where you prove God, and that's where God proves you. How do you prove faith? It's on the mountaintop of total commitment, that's where you prove faith. How does God prove the man or the woman of faith? When they totally surrender to him.

Someone calls this the Christian triple-A club, anything, anywhere, anytime. When you join the Christian triple-A club and say to God, God, I surrender, I'll do anything, I'll do it anywhere, I'll do it anytime, perhaps you can add two more to that, anyone, any way, just keep saying those any's to God, and say, God, there isn't anything I won't do. When Abraham was willing to offer up Isaac twice in that 22nd chapter of Genesis, God says, you don't have to do it, Abraham, because now I know that you would not withhold anything from me, not even your only son.

The message of the Bible comes down to two words again and again, and those two words are, God first. That isn't easy, but that isn't complicated. I believe theologians make it so complicated because they don't want to put God first.

It's not really complex, it's just very difficult. In fact, the New Testament says, No man can say that Jesus is Lord, or that God is first, unless the Spirit of God is given to him. No man can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.

Putting God first is not only difficult, it's impossible. If you have a spiritual experience, if you are born again, then you'll see the kingdom of God, the fact that God is King, and you'll enter into that relationship with him where he is your King, where he is first, where he is Lord and Master, where he is everything, or he isn't anything. You see that and you enter into that when you are born again.

That's what happened to Abraham on that Mount Moriah when he built that fourth altar. There you have the altars of Abraham, the altar of response, the altar of repentance, the altar of relationship, the altar of reality. I wonder, how many altars have you built? Have you built the altar of response yet? Having built the altar of response, I wonder, have you built the altar of repentance? Have you ever made a clean break with the past and separated yourself from the past? Have you built the altar of relationship? And above all, have you built the altar of reality? Have you really seen that if God is anything, God is everything? Because if God isn't everything, then God isn't really anything.

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