

As we go through these key, foundational stories in the Old Testament one thing I want you to keep in mind, is that we are not going to find perfect people in these stories.

You may have noticed that some Sunday School curriculum has been written so that Old Testament characters kind of get built up as Bible Heroes and as a result they make the mistake of taking the story and just turning it into a moral lesson.

As in, "Here's the hero of the story, now you should be like that hero."

"Have faith, like Abraham. Have patience like Job.

Have courage, like David fighting Goliath."

But is the Old Testament, just a book of virtues? Where the teacher says, "Here's the lesson, now go and be like the hero?"

I hope you don't see God's stories in the Old Testament like that. In the Bible, God's people are often faithful, but also flawed. Just like you and me.

How many of you came from a perfect family?

What, nobody?

Seriously, that's good.

It's good to be honest and not try to fake it.

We're not here to pretend to be something we're not.

We're here today, and each Sunday, to confess our sins, and receive the gift of forgiveness. We're here to sing God's praises and be strengthened through God's Word, and by his Spirit, to live **by** the Spirit.

And as **God** works in us, to trust God each day. To live by Faith!

That's the story of Abraham, the story of learning to trust God. Sometimes in fits and starts, but ultimately to trust God and God's promises.

So this morning let's start with the Lower Story.

The Lower story is the very human story of each character we meet in the Bible.

It's the part of the story that sometimes shocks us, because we wonder how some of these stories even made it into the Bible.

The Lower Story is the story of the mistakes we make, the times we resist God, and try to take life into our own hands.

We saw that last week in the story of Adam and Eve, rebelling and trying to take the place of God. And then God entering their story, calling out to them in the Garden, when they were hiding and calling them back into relationship.

Today's Lower story, begins with Abraham in place called Harran, a place beyond the Euphrates River, way up north, in what is modern day Turkey.

And in the book of Joshua, it tells us that Abraham and his relatives worshipped pagan gods. So it shouldn't surprise us that some of the ways they lived, including having servants or slaves, don't line up with what we expect of God's people.

But here is where God's story, what we call the Upper Story, meets the lower story. God calls out to Abram, and says, "Go from your country, your people, and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you.
I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

And so Abraham obeys. Abraham trusts God.
He didn't know where he was going, but he chose to walk in faith.
Abraham chose to stand on God's promises.

But as the story progresses, we see a few detours along the way.
Again and again, we see that though Abraham and Sarah are faithful, they are also flawed. They are very human.
They trusted God, but at the same time, they doubted. They looked at how old they were and doubted whether God could provide them with children.

I like how the summary in *The Story*, put it:

"One problem remained that even the Almighty seemed unable to solve. It was Abraham's greatest worry and the main topic of his dialogues with God."

So let me ask you, this question;

"As you think about your own story, have you ever felt that you were dealing with a problem that even God seemed unable to solve?"
"Have you ever had a great worry that became the main topic of your dialogues with God, day after day, and night after night?"

We don't come from perfect families.
We don't live in perfect families.
Sometimes we mess up, or members of our family mess up, in ways that have lasting consequences. We hurt people and we get into situations we don't know how to get out of.

My grandma Sylvia, came from a family like that.
 The web of dysfunction and hurt in that family was deep.
 Alcoholism was one part of it. Sibling rivalries were another part.
 But honestly, I can't fully explain to you everything that was involved.

I just know that as I was growing up, two of my aunts, went many years without speaking to one another. And both of these aunts, were a constant source of pain for my grandma. It was a worry for my Grandma, and I'm sure at times, she felt it was a problem too big for even God to solve.

Have you ever had one of those problems?
 Have you ever given up hope that God can make a difference
 and you've turned in other directions, and tried to take matters into your own hands?

That's what Abraham and Sarah did.
 When they were in Egypt, when Abraham was afraid of the Pharaoh
 instead of trusting God to protect his wife, he told her to lie, and say that she was his sister.

Have you ever told a lie, to try to get yourself out of trouble?

Abraham and Sarah also tried to take matters into their own hands
 when Abraham tried to produce an heir with Hagar.
 They thought God needed a little help.
 So instead of trusting God they carried out their own plan.

But that plan didn't work out so well.

And the same thing happens to us, when we decide to we've got a better idea than God.
 God says, "vengeance is mine."
 But sometimes when we're hurt, we try to get even and hurt someone back.

Jesus says, "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you"
 But many times we forget to pray.
 And instead, we end up stewing in our hatred, and holding bitter grudges.

That's when our Lower story, resembles Abraham's Lower story.
 When our sinful nature, fails to trust God, and God's promises.

But listen to how God breaks into this story, time and time again.
 God meets Abraham, in the midst of his doubts,
 God meets Abraham, in the midst of his schemes, and lack of trust.
 God pursues him in love and speaks to him.

"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."

But 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?”

And Abram said, “You give me not children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.”

He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

Abram believed the Lord, and God credited to him as righteousness.

“Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations...”

God spoke and “against all hope, Abraham in hope believed.”

Abraham had every reason, not to believe.
All he could see seemed to point in the other direction.

But God spoke and “against all hope, Abraham in hope believed.”

Do you believe God can speak into your life,
and give you hope, even in the midst of a seemingly hopeless situation?
I’m here to tell you, God can... and God will.

In the Bible, God speaks, and God acts.
And today, through the message of this Story, God still speaks, and God still acts.

In the story with Abraham and his son Isaac all evidence seemed to be pointing in a very bad direction. We can’t help but wonder, with stories like the ones we’ve been hearing from the NFL, why God would ever seem to be advocating violence against a child.

But is that was taking place here?
On one level, it seems that way.
In fact in that culture, and at that time in history, child sacrifice was common.

I can’t say I understood this story, fully, until a few years ago, when I had the chance to travel with some members of the church I served in Iowa, to visit our sister congregation Tanzania.

On night, I was visiting with my host family, by lamplight, and a group of children from neighboring homes, came by.

And after a while they began singing a song and they got to a part in the song where they began singing loudly and stamped their feet on the ground emphatically as they pointed up the mountain, above the village.

And so after the song, I asked for an interpretation, and my host told me that the song told the story about the time before missionaries had to their village.

In those days, the villagers were quite superstitious and fearful of offending the gods. And so they would perform sacrifices to insure a good harvest, or other favors from the gods.

And they were so superstitious and fearful of the gods, that they would sacrifice valuable things, even to the point of sacrificing a human life.

In fact it was common for parents to take a baby, and place the child up high on a flat rock high above the village, and expose it to the elements, as a sacrifice to the gods, and to appease the gods, they would leave the child there to die.

But when the children stamped their feet, they were singing, "No more!" "Never again."

And the rest of the song, was a song of praise to God for bringing the Gospel to their village, the Gospel which freed them from their fear and superstition.

God spoke, through the missionaries,
and God spoke through the Bible as it was preaching to them in their own language.

And they learned that God is a God of life, not of death.
God is a God of healing and forgiveness.
The time of sacrifices and burnt offerings is over.

In fact, God's own Son, had already paid the price for our sin, once and for all.
Everything that was necessary to reconcile us to our Father in heaven has already been accomplished. Through Jesus our relationship to God has been restored.

And that Good news changed that village forever.

In the same way, the story of Abraham and Isaac was God's way of telling the people of Israel,
"No more!" "Never again."
"God will provide."

And it changed the culture of child sacrifice for the Israelites, and for all of their ancestors.

When I visited that remote mountain village in Tanzania, they still didn't have electricity or modern conveniences. But they had something that money could never buy.
They had peace. And they sang with more joy than I can even describe.

That's the kind of peace and joy that God wants us to have.

God wants to restore relationships like he did between Jacob and Esau.
After twenty years, God brought these two brothers together, and they reconciled.

Jacob, the night before he reconciled with Esau, had that mysterious wrestling match with what could have been an angel and they wrestled until daybreak.
And Jacob would not let go.

In fact, he said, "I will not let go until you bless me."
The man or the angel asked him, "What is your name?"
"Jacob," he answered.

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

That new name he received, "Israel" means, God strives for his undivided people.

And it was the next day, that Jacob met Esau.
Jacob was afraid that Esau would still be angry.
But instead Esau saw him and ran to him, and embraced him, and forgave him.

And after that Jacob said to his whole household,
"Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves."
And he said, "Let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress,
and who has been with me wherever I have gone."

And here is where Jacob's story and Abraham's story meets our story.

Did you know, the Bible calls us the new Israel?
that we are the inheritors of the covenant God made with Abraham?

We are God's new creation, and God is still striving after us. God wants us to be his undivided people. God wants us as his own.
God wants us to turn away from other gods, and trust in His promises.

And when we doubt, or feel like giving up hope,
remember that God still speaks, and God still acts.

Stand on God's promises, and you will never be disappointed. Amen