

Pastoral Sermon Notes

1977 saw the release of a Television miniseries entitled Jesus of Nazareth. It was an ecumenical effort led mostly by Rome, but it had the support of some Jews. The series is over 6-hours long.

1977 is the year I was born so I don't have any memory of the movie until the 1980s because they would air it during the week leading up to Easter.

There is a scene (among others) that left a lasting impression on me. The scene is that of Jews worshipping in the synagogue when it is suddenly interrupted by a man announcing that Roman soldiers have ridden into town. The residents become fearful since they see the Romans as oppressors. The soldiers had come into town to secure provisions for themselves from the Jewish residents, but they don't do so without protestations and displeasure from the Jews. When the soldiers finally ride off, a Jewish man runs after the soldiers calling down curses on them until he falls to his knees in grief and bitterly cries out to God asking,

"How long must we wait, O LORD, for you to help us?"

When another Jewish man witnesses this outcry, he hangs his head in despair and concludes that God had indeed abandoned them. One of the reasons that the scene made a deep impression on me (apart from the acting) is that while man is crying out, the scene switches to the boy Jesus who was among the worshippers in the synagogue. He's emerges from the men and stands there with his penetrating eyes looking intently at the one who is crying out to God, "How long must we wait, O LORD, for you to help us?" I remember thinking, "There is your answer. He's standing right there." Now, granted, the film makers took artistic license, but the religious and political climate is captured in that scene.

It is true that God-fearing people throughout history have experienced that very sentiment. "How long, O LORD?" We've all had our patience and faith tested because it seems like God takes so long.

"Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled. But you, O LORD—how long? Turn, O LORD, deliver my life; save me for the sake of your steadfast love. For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise? I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows weak because of all my foes." (Psalm 6:2–7, ESV)

“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” (Psalm 13:1–2, ESV)

It may sound cliché, but it is true when people say, “God’s timing is not our timing.”

There is a contemporary song in this same vein, it’s ministers from time to time:

Verse 1

I'm waiting
I'm waiting on You, Lord
And I am hopeful
I'm waiting on You, Lord
Though it is painful
But patiently, I will wait

Bridge

I will move ahead, bold and confident
Taking every step in obedience

Chorus

While I'm waiting, I will serve You
While I'm waiting, I will worship
While I'm waiting, I will not faint
I'll be running the race, Even while I wait

Verse 2

I'm waiting
I'm waiting on You, Lord
And I am peaceful
I'm waiting on You, Lord
Though it's not easy, no
But faithfully, I will wait
Yes, I will wait

Faith Waits

The songs says, "I'll be running the race, even while I wait." That statement captures this aspect of faith, namely that *faith waits*, yet it isn't a passive waiting. Biblical faith isn't a sit-around-and-do-nothing waiting.

Abraham and Sarah Patiently Waited

This morning, we are examining God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah. We will see that their faith started small, their faith and patience were tested.

We don't know how old Abram was when God called him to leave his country, his kindred and his father's house (Genesis 12:1), but we do know that he “was seventy-five years old when he [finally] departed from Haran.” (Genesis 12:4). Haran was not his

country. God called him before he lived in Haran. Abram was from Ur of the Chaldeans (SE Corner of Iraq). It was while he was there that God called him (Acts 7:2). Abraham takes his time, we do not know exactly why, but he does, and when he finally leaves his home country he does not separate from his “kindred and [his] father’s house” (Genesis 12:1) as God had told him to do.

“Terah *took* Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram’s wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there.” (Genesis 11:31)

These are the beginnings of a faith that will grow with time and this growth will correspond with God’s appearances to Abraham.

Believing Against Hope

We can point to several reasons why Abram’s faith is impressive.

- He and Sarai are old.
- Sarai is barren.
- They ventured toward a land that was occupied by others.

Consider how we would view people today who might profess a faith such as theirs. Imagine a childless, elderly couple ordering their lives in such a way that they communicate to others that they look forward to inheriting land and starting a family that would grow into a nation. Who could blame anyone for believing that such people are suffering from mental health issues?

Think of what naysayers could have said to Sarai,

“Sarai, if you could not conceive when you were young and healthy, what makes you think that you will conceive now when you are old and certainly past the age of child bearing? And even if you do conceive, you will not live long enough to see your child grow into adulthood!

And this land that you plan to inherit, do you think its current owners are simply going to hand it over? You and what army?”

Believing Against Hope

This is why the New Testament calls Abraham “the man of faith”

Paul describes “the faith of Abraham” in this way, namely that “In hope he believed against hope” (Romans 4:18).

What does this mean?

“He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.” (Romans 4:19–21, ESV)

Instead of looking to the reality of his aging body and the barrenness of Sarai’s womb, he instead looked to God who had promised. He was “fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.”

But we have to be honest. Abraham’s faith as described in Romans 4 doesn’t sound like the faith we see in Genesis, at least not in the beginning.

Faith is Progressive: Abraham Grew Strong In His Faith (Romans 4:20).

It is important for us to understand that faith is supposed to grow. This is how you know faith is real and alive. It grows. Growing in faith is directly proportionate to growing in the knowledge of God. There can be no growth apart from increasing in the knowledge of God. God has made himself known through scripture, the more you know scripture, the more you know God. The more you know God, the know you grow to trust him.

This is why it says not merely that Abraham “grew...in his faith,” but that he “grew **strong** in his faith.” He grew strong in the same way that the roots of a tree grow deeper into the ground.

When Jesus described people with superficial faith, he used the the metaphor of “seed [falling] on rocky ground, where there is not much soil. The plant immediately grows, but since the soil is shallow, when the sun scorches it, it withers away because of the shallow roots.” (Mark 4:5–6)

The disciples of Jesus asked him to explain this metaphor and so he said that it pertains to people who initially believe, but when things get heated, that is, “when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away” (Mk 4:17). Faith need not be perfect, but it does need to be progressive. If we understand this, then we won’t be confused about Abraham and Sarah’s actions that on the surface appear to be more in keeping with unbelief than that of trusting God.

Sarai Too Grew in Faith

Understanding that faith is progressive explains Sarah's plan for Abraham and Hagar. Sarah knew that God had promised Abram that *he* would father a great nation, but concerning herself she'd concluded, "The Lord has prevented me from bearing children" (Genesis 16:2)

"Go in to my servant [Hagar]; it may be that I shall obtain children by her" (Genesis 16:2).

You could argue that this wasn't necessarily an act of unbelief, but one of faith. Perhaps an uninformed faith, but faith nonetheless. She certainly believed that she would raise up children with Abraham as God promised, but given the reality of her barrenness, she believed that raising up offspring for Abram would have to forego the traditional route. This is not much different from couples today who believe God wants them raise up children, but are unable to do so naturally, so they look to adoption.

Sarah had faith, but she lacked specific *knowledge*. She believed in what God would do, but did not know how he would do it.

You must remember that God had spoken to Abram specifically, namely that he...

Between Genesis 12 and 17, there are only X recorded instances of God making promises to Abraham. The first is Genesis 12, "The Lord said to Abram...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" (Genesis 12:1-2).

So God became more specific after the Hagar and Ismael episode. And as the Lord said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name 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 become nations; kings of peoples shall come *from* her." (Genesis 17:15-16)

Notice Abraham's initial response. He certainly doesn't sound strong in faith. He doesn't sound unwavering. He doesn't sound fully convinced.

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself,

"Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (v. 17)

Abraham does not sound like the man of faith of Romans 4:19-21

“[Abraham] did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.” (Romans 4:19–21, ESV)

Consider Sarai’s initial response

This does not sound like the Sarah of Hebrews 11 when it says that *“By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.” (Hebrews 11:11).*