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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

**June 20, 2021**

**Abraham's Journey Revisited**

**Selected Scriptures**

**Prayer:** *Father, we just again, we thank you for this church, we just thank you for, as Fred said, the privilege we have to gather each week and corporately offer up our praise and worship to you, and we just thank you for it. We just continue to pray, Lord, as this part of our corporate worship is opening up your book and looking into what you have to teach us and to pray ahead of time, Lord, that your Holy Spirit would come by alongside us, that you would accompany us and to make this of permanent value. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Have you ever cried out to God only to find out that the heavens in response were silent? Have you ever wondered why it is that everyone else seems to enjoy a relationship with God marked by some personal connection between them and God that you don't seem to have? Well for years I've tried to put into words the struggle that I think hits many if not most evangelicals, and it is the struggle of God's perceived absence. I pointed out that we use the term "perceived absence" instead of just "absence" because God's

absence is far more a matter of our perception than it is of actual reality. I mean we know from scripture, we know specifically from Romans 8:32 that God is with us always and that nothing can separate us from the love of God. However, we also know that God is determined above all else to grow our faith within us. And for God that means training us to live lives that are diametrically opposed to the way that we normally live. You see, we walk by sight and not by faith and it's God's goal to reverse that order in our lives to make us creatures who walk by faith and not by sight, and that's not natural for us. The human body is estimated to have over 100 million sensory receptors designed to take in data from the physical world because that's how we're wired. As human beings we're trained from infancy to trust in those things that we can feel through our senses. And if we can't see, hear, taste, touch and smell something, we seriously have a hard time believing that it's real. Well as children of God, we are actively being trained by God to believe rather than feel.

Last week we started a series I've entitled "Now You See Me, Now You Don't" which is obviously the name of a game that we play with infants. And it's my contention that God is not playing games with us at all when his interaction with us seems to include much more of his absence than it does his presence. And we looked for the reasons for that absence last week and we found and we stated three

of them. First God's absence is normative, that is to say that it is normal to be sensing God's absence more than his presence. I pointed out that for years I thought I simply wasn't getting it and that everybody else enjoyed a relationship with God where he walked with them and he talked with them and he told them he was their own. Turns out that's not really the case. "Now you see me, now you don't" is the normal way that God operates today. I mean God absolutely communicates to us in many different ways, but the communication and fellowship that Adam and Eve at one time enjoyed with God is something that we can only look forward to enjoying in the next life and not in this one. You see this life is now preparing us for the next one. And God's very clear that much of our struggle to connect with God is a normal part of living in a fallen world that God says is really only temporary. This is what he says in *2 Corinthians 4*. He says: *For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.* You see it's God's intention to grow us in the things that are unseen and eternal and that often involves struggle. And more often than not it involves God's absence so much more than his presence. So God's absence is normal. It's normative.

And secondly, I mentioned that God's absence is necessary and it was necessitated by the fall of Adam. I went into detail last week that prior to the fall in the Garden of Eden mankind and God were perfectly connected and God's absence was nonexistent. The truly awful thing about the fall is not that Adam and Eve had committed a simple act of disobedience, it's that they had fundamentally altered their nature making it so foreign now, so foreign to God's nature, that the two could not be together. God remained perfect; Adam and Eve unknowingly embraced imperfection. Through one single act of disobedience they had now lost their perfection and they passed that imperfection on to every subsequent offspring they had, and that includes you and me. We are born sons and daughters of Adam flawed from the beginning, having inherited a fallen nature that now fears our God.

And here's the tragic side to the dilemma of our fallenness: You see, we now fear God and we hide from him just like Adam and Eve did in the garden. But in hiding from God we're hiding from the very purpose for which we were created. You see, we are the creatures who alone possess the *imago Dei*, the very image of God. This is what God said in *Genesis 1:26*: *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing*

*that creeps on the earth."* So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. There's no other creature that God ever created that would ever share in that privilege. But consequently we have inherited a spiritual schizophrenia. We were created by God as the highest order of his creation in order to reflect back to God the glory of his creation. That is what makes us tick. And though we were designed for worship, we fear and we loathe the object of that worship. I mean that longing for God is as much of a part of our natural spiritual DNA as it is our physical DNA but because of the fall, we now have this desperate fear and loathing of God himself. I mean if you doubt that, if you think I'm just throwing out incendiary remarks, consider this from God's perspective. I mean God left heaven itself and he came to earth as one of us, and he didn't just live any old life among us, he lived a flawless, perfect life. It consisted in his perfect adherence to God's moral law which means that from infancy he did nothing but perfectly love God and love his fellow man. Once his public ministry began, the scripture says -- quote -- *"Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction."* In turn for living this absolutely flawless life in which he did nothing but good to his fellow man, he was arrested and tried and mocked and tortured and crucified. And as he was

being tortured Pilate asked the crowd if they would release him. The crowd's response sums up perfectly mankind's response to God intervening in mankind's existence. Pilate who wanted absolutely nothing to do with Jesus said, "I'm innocent of this man's blood," and the crowd which represented the rank and file, people that Jesus had spent his entire life loving and caring for and healing, they all said, "May his blood be on us and on our children."

So I think I can make the case pretty well that mankind for no reason whatsoever fixed its collective fear and loathing of God on the man Christ Jesus. This is what Jesus himself said in *John 15*. He said: *"If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: 'They hated me without a cause.'"* So this gospel that we proclaim is that this same Jesus, hated, tortured and executed was not the victim of circumstance but rather God in the flesh who came down to earth and paid the price of our sin and exchanged his righteousness for that sin when we place our faith in his death and resurrection. That is the price that God was willing to pay to make a way for God's absence to end. It was absence that was clearly necessary for both our sakes and for God's and at least to our subject this morning. See, God's absence is normal, it's normative, it's necessary. And for much of our lives this tension

between the image of God that we were designed for and this fallen image that we now possess is the natural state that we find ourselves in. I mean, our greatest fear and our deepest need is one in the same. It's God. And over against that spiritual schizophrenia, God is determined to grow us into a new normal that's rooted in faith. And there's a reason why God says: *"For we walk by faith and not by sight,"* and God is determined to grow that capacity within each of us.

As I said last week Peter describes the natural purpose behind many of our trials. This is what he says. He says: *In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith -- more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire -- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.* Peter's telling us that our tested faith is more precious than gold. He says it's precious to us but it's precious to God. And God is determined to produce that precious faith in our lives, and I don't know anything that tests the genuineness of our faith more than God's perceived absence. So would it not then follow that a natural part of God's plan for each of us would include significant periods of time when God is apparently absent, when the only thing that we have to go on is what we -- not what we feel, not what we see, but what we know.

That's what faith is. *Hebrews 11* says: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* The most important thing not seen is not a thing, it's God.

So when we look to scripture we find many examples of God's perceived absence in the lives of his people. And God has a similar faith walk in mind for every one of his children. Every situation in scripture is unique but so is yours and mine, I mean, understand, God has a plan to grow you in faith -- quote -- "*so that the tested genuineness of your faith -- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*" By the way, God says that tested faith is -- quote -- "*more precious than gold that perishes though it's tested by fire.*"

So this morning we want to look at part one of Abraham's life, that's the father of the faith. I mean if we pull back to the ten thousand foot level and with the benefit of history, we can see precisely how God goes about the business of growing faith in Abraham. We see him take one step forward and then two steps back and we also see this steady progression from weak faith to father of the faith, and it's all because of God's hand in his life. And what God is doing in Abraham's life, he's also doing in your life and my life as well. Because like Abraham, we too take one step forward and oftentimes two steps back, but like Abraham we too have



God working in our life to produce a tested genuine faith. So let's take a look at Abraham's life.

I mean first of all, I can certainly see most people thinking, well, if I had the advantages that Abraham had with regard to faith, I mean I'd believe like he believed. It's easy to read scripture and come away from Abraham's story thinking that if anyone had a personal relationship with God, well then Abraham did, and he did. We have to understand the pattern that God laid down in the way he dealt with Abraham and that pattern has many times of God's bewildering absence, as many times of that absence as there is of his presence.

Now did God actually meet with Abraham? Well, yes, he did, he did on more than one occasion. Did God actually speak with him? Yes again. I mean no doubt Abraham had some amazing connections to God. But what God worked in Abraham was way beyond anything he's ever asked of you or me. I mean Abraham's living this life as a pagan, he's living in Ur of the Chaldees and he has this first confrontation with the living God in *Genesis 12:1*. It says this: *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. And 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. I will bless those who*

*bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." 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. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan.*

Okay. So at 75 years of age Abraham picks up, he leaves every single trace of his family and his history and he takes off literally for parts unknown. Why? Because God told him to. I mean it's amazingly easy to just dismiss how hard this must have been for Abraham. I mean, imagine God met you last night. He just appeared to you and he told you he wanted you to go to a central part of Mexico where you know absolutely nobody, you don't know the language, you know nothing. You just happen to know that that's a place where people are sometimes kidnapped, raped and beheaded, that there's no law and there's no protection. All you've got going for you is God's instruction to get up and go. It would have to be a pretty powerful voice to get you to move in that direction. Well God provided that voice. And Abraham in response provided his very first act of faith.

And so we look at Abraham's life as a case in point of "now you see

me, now you don't," and we see this pattern beginning here and repeating itself throughout his life. You see, Abraham receives this amazing input from God -- now you see him. But then it's followed by extended periods of time where God is growing Abraham's ability to trust him in his absence -- it's the "now you don't" phase of Abraham's testing. And we see this right from the beginning. God appears to Abraham and it's certainly a big deal and he tells him to leave, but he doesn't tell him where he's going to wind up.

God reconnects with Abraham in Canaan, and he tells him that he's going to become a great nation. And then his journey takes him to Egypt but not because God has appeared to him, not because God is whispering in his ear pointing out the direction of where he has to go but instead because of something far more prosaic. *Genesis 12:10* says: *Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.* Abraham's starving. As we start following Abraham's journey of faith, we discover that it contains lots of detours, lots of difficulties. And in the midst of those detours and difficulties, God is silent. Well, if you pan back and look at the big picture, what you see here is God doing precisely what you would expect. He asserts himself into Abraham's life and then he pulls back. Abraham is just beginning his journey of learning how to trust God

and sometimes he takes one step forward and sometimes he takes two steps back. And when he enters into Egypt he takes two big steps back. This is verse 11. It says: *When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake."*

Abraham's going to get caught in a lie about Sarah. And before you come down on Abraham ask yourself if you've ever been in a situation where the possibility of somebody murdering you in order to take your wife is a possibility. I mean under that kind of pressure Abraham adds deceit to the lie by basically telling a half-lie or literally a half-truth because Sarah was in fact his half-sister.

So we have Abraham, he starts out with this great burst of faith, he just picks up and he leaves everything and now he's met his first big speed bump. From Abraham's perspective he's seen God and now he has not. He's in Egypt not because he got some instruction from God and he met him in the garden and God said, "I want you to go here" but because life itself has forced his hand through a famine. Now that he's in Egypt circumstances, that is to say the beauty of his wife Sarah and the interest of Pharaoh, is what's

starting to guide his hand. I mean inside Abraham's head he's thinking, "God's not here. Where's God? I mean he told me to move and now I'm starving. And my wife's beauty is going to wind up getting me killed." And so he chooses foolishly with that kind of perspective. But here's the point you need to see. The point is God was never absent from Abraham. We see this in God's reaction in his bad decision. I mean look at this from God's perspective. God allows the natural consequences of Abraham's actions to play themselves out, and right from the start it's just a disaster. *Genesis 12 says: And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her -- that's Abram's wife -- they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels.*

So Pharaoh's piling on all these gifts to Abram after he's taken his wife thinking it's just his sister. Picture Abram watching this disaster unfold knowing it was his half-truth that started it all. And into this picture comes God literally to the rescue. Verse 17 says: *But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.* See God's not absent. In fact God has never been absent; he just doesn't reveal himself. I mean there's two different principles that are at work here. God is actively growing Abraham's faith by his perceived

absence but he's also protecting him behind the scenes. Where was God when hunger drove Abraham to Egypt? Where was God when Pharaoh took an interest in his wife? Well the answer is God was hidden right there beside Abraham. In the midst of God's perceived absence we find God actually coming to Abraham's rescue. See, God's silence actually pushed Abram in a direction that would teach him a great deal about God's faithfulness. And God was also protecting the covenant promise that he had made that Abraham would become a great nation. Again this has implications for your life and for mine. You see, however we fit into God's plan is going to determine how he develops our life of faith. I mean Abraham had some extraordinary interventions by God, but that's because God had extraordinary plans for Abraham. But that doesn't mean that God's discipline wasn't simultaneously at work shaping and molding Abraham's life of faith. So what followed was an extremely unpleasant experience for Abraham. We pick up on *Genesis 12:18*. *So Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go."* And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had. Well, the experience launches Abraham on a faith journey that includes many, many steps forward and unfortunately many steps backwards; but understand something, it's no different than your

faith journey or mine. See God is always at work and he's always disciplining.

Donald Grey Barnhouse once described the work of the Holy Spirit by describing certain people who work with the ice skaters at Rockefeller Center in the wintertime. These are professional skaters and he said they skate along some ten feet behind their clients in the crowd. And all they do is they skate along with them and they keep their eyes peeled on their client. And if the client starts to stumble, they accelerate, come a alongside them, steady them until they're all set and then they go back into the crowd. That's like the Holy Spirit. That's what God is trying to show us here. He comes alongside us to keep us from stumbling. But by and large he's back in the crowd. Abraham's journey played itself out between pharaohs and kings and our journey plays itself out between bosses and co-workers and relatives and friends but the process is exactly the same: Now you see God, now you don't. And when you don't see him he is still right there waiting to step in whenever it's necessary.

I spoke last week about my own experience which God overwhelmingly asserted his presence in my life at first when I first came to Christ. But then he did precisely what he did in Abraham's life, he backed away and I began to feel God's perceived absence. And

guess what, I had my series of stumblings as well. One of my deepest stumblings happened some 40 years ago. Our twin boys Dan and Ben had just been born, they were born ten weeks premature, they were in Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York City, they were growing a bill of a thousand dollars a day. We had no insurance. As a family we were in one of the worst economic circumstance that we had ever been in work wise; I was still working as a cabinetmaker. It just seems that every one of you in this room know this, when things begin to go south, they go south in pairs and triplets and quads. It just seems to happen all the time. We had a series of setbacks economically and it was all capped by an appearance with the Department of Health at my door informing us that our septic system had failed. We have a pond on our property that feeds another pond and we were required to replace it. I mean I'd only been back east for a couple of years; we had moved from California. I didn't know what a septic system was. And by the time I had it figured out, I knew that the money required to fix it was way beyond anything that we had. So I figured if we poured our lifesavings into everything that we had into repairing it, we would come close but we were still short by a thousand dollars. Just remember, a thousand dollars, this is 40 years ago. I don't know what that amount is now but it's considerably more than a thousand dollars. But I remember gathering our family together and I said, Look, God is faithful.



We don't want a new septic system, that's not high on our list of cool things to get, it's not like a TV or a car. I said we have no choice in this but God has promised that he's going to meet all of our needs, so I'm confident he's going to provide. And so I fully expected that God would provide by giving me the work that I needed to get it taken care of. But guess what happened? A famine broke out in Port Jervis, a famine of work for me and work dried up completely. The Department of Health said I had until the spring to get the system fixed but then I'd be liable to \$250-a-day fines. So we knew we had to do something. We had spent our lifesavings doing what we could but we were still a thousand dollars short. So I was certain that God would provide and I was certain he would provide the means. What he provided for instead was a famine. So months went by and things economically went from bad to worse and so did my faith, just like Abraham's. Where are you, God? Don't you realize I called my whole family before you and said you're going to come through for us? You're absent, God. Where are you? But was he? I mean I know now what I didn't know then. I know now I was in the middle of a "now you see me, now you don't" moment. Try as I might I couldn't find God anywhere.

So I didn't know, I mean, do I need to go to a bank? Do I need to ask for a loan? What do we do? How do I avoid this fine? So I had the same taste of Abraham's mindset. With that frame of mind

one morning I went to the mailbox. And I walked to the mailbox and I opened it up, inside was this little letter from a person named Peter Boromeo. Just to give you a little background, some of you have heard this already, Peter Boromeo was a good friend of ours when we lived in California, somebody that I had been out of touch with for over two years. We had lost contact with the folks that we were part of a church with in California, and it was a real shock and it was a real surprise to see a note from Peter Boromeo. I haven't heard from him in ages. And I opened up the letter, there's a tiny little statement there paper clipped to a check and it said, "Dear Tom, God told me to send this to you. I know he will bless you as he's blessed me." It was a check for a thousand dollars. I mean I burst into tears. I mean I was so blown away that God had gone 3,000 miles away and touched somebody in a way that I was not prepared to realize. I got on the phone, I called him up and I said, "I need to know how -- how you came to this decision." And I've said this before, he's a funny guy, he was a very successful salesman, he worked for IBM or one of those companies, he had just gotten laid off. He said, I'm in my room, he said, it's in the middle of the night, all of a sudden I wake up and God says, "You need to write a check." And he said, "What?" And he said it was so powerful that I got up and I'm sitting down and he said, "And it needs to be a thousand dollars." And I actually remember him saying this, he says, "Brother, I love you

but I don't love you a thousand dollars." And he said it would not stop. It would not stop until I wrote that letter, put it in that envelope and put it in the mail.

Well obviously the money wasn't the important issue here. What was important is God asserting himself as the God who hears and answers prayer on his timetable, not mine. And what God was doing thousands of years ago in Abraham's life he was doing right then, right there in my life. I mean I had become bitter and angry. I wish I could say God was rewarding my faith. He was rewarding my faithlessness. I'd become bitter and angry that God had abandoned me and he was there all along. I was stumbling and in his timing he asserted his presence. So now I saw him. But you know as soon as I got back on my feet, guess what? We were back to "now you don't" because we walk by faith and not by sight.

So as we examine Abraham's life we see this pattern start to repeat itself. I mean God has revealed himself powerfully to Abraham telling him to move out but then he pulls back and Abraham falters. Then God inserts himself once again to Pharaoh and Abraham's faith continues to grow. And so we follow Abraham next to his falling out with his nephew Lot. They've both grown so large that the people, they're quarreling over grazing rights. Again this quarrel takes place in God's perceived absence. Understand, God didn't

say, "Oh, Lot, Abraham, I need you guys to sit down with me. We're going to have a discussion about this problem that you're having." That's not there. That didn't happen. There's just a conflict going on that Abraham needs to resolve, but through this conflict we begin to see faith growing in Abraham. We pick up on *Genesis 13:7*. It says: *And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites were dwelling in the land. Then Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left."* Abraham has clearly grown in his faith. I mean he's now giving Lot the option to choose the choice land, and he says I'll take whatever's left. He's trusting God for the results. And see that kind of choice is not something that God wants to be uniquely Abrahamic. He wants that for all of us. God presents us frequently with opportunities to either trust him or trust in our talent our ability or our influence. I mean Abraham chose wisely because his trust was not in the resources he was obviously giving up but in God as his ultimate resource. And you don't have to be Abraham to experience that kind of decision. I mean do you go with what is safe and what is obvious or what appears dangerous but is clearly God's best? Well, Abraham chose

God's best. So Lot chooses the choicest land and he winds up getting kidnapped. After Abraham rescues Lot, God meets him again and gives him this vision of the future in *Genesis 15*. It says: *After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*

So what an incredible vision, what an incredible promise and what amazing faith we see in Abraham. I mean Abraham's words would be repeated by Paul as the centerpiece of the righteousness that we get that comes through faith. This is what Paul said in *Romans 4:3*. He said: *For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the*

*ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.* Understand, this is what God was growing in Abraham. Abraham for years now has had these repeated encounters with the living God, he's seen God's presence and he has deeply felt his absence. He's grown enormously in his faith journey. But no journey is a straight line success and Abraham is no exception. Abraham once again meets with God who is about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, and not once or twice but five separate times he challenges God to accept a lower number of righteous men to prevent Sodom from being destroyed. This is *Genesis 18*. It says: *Then Abraham drew near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it?"* And you know the story. Abraham goes on to say, how about forty-five? Forty? Thirty? Twenty? Ten? Understand what's going on here. Abraham is negotiating with the God of the universe. He has become a mighty man of faith, but from that height he goes right back to the same behavior we saw right at the very beginning.

After Sodom is destroyed, Abraham begins to journey once again and he finds himself in a new kingdom with a new king, this is king Abimelech and he tells the king the very same half-lie he told at the beginning. This is *Genesis 20*. It says: *From there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb and lived between*

*Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.* I mean you would have thought by now that Abraham had learned his lesson, but he hasn't. And so God who has been absent once again becomes present. He steps in to rescue Abraham, Sarah and the covenant, and once again it's very, very unpleasant for Abraham. I mean the first time it was extremely unpleasant with Pharaoh in Egypt. This second time it's with Abimelech, and in both cases Abraham abandons his faith and he tries to rely on his own cleverness. And now we've seen God intervene in Abraham's life repeatedly, we've also seen God clearly withdraw, allowing Abraham to make these choices, some of which weren't good at all. And in both of these instances God is clearly leaving Abraham up to his own bad decisions. I mean nobody's whispering in his ear, no one's telling him, "Do this, don't do this; go here, do that." God is clearly absent in these instances but he's not absent in the way we think he would be absent. In both instances God allows Abraham's bad decisions about Sarah to backfire right in his face. But in both instances God swoops in to protect Abraham and Sarah from those bad decisions. I mean Abraham lies to the Egyptian authorities and as Pharaoh's about to take her as his wife, God strikes his house with great plagues. In Abimelech's case Abraham makes the same bad decision to lie about Sarah and God appears to Abimelech in a dream and tells him, you

touch Sarah, you're a dead man. This is Genesis 20: So Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all his servants and told them all these things. And the men were very much afraid. Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, "What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done." And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What did you see, that you did this thing?" Abraham said, "I did it because I thought, 'There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.'" Really, Abraham? I mean God has led you all of these years, he's spoken to you repeatedly, he's shown you his faithfulness and all you can think about is saving your skin because God's going to abandon me. Well, Abimelech gives Abraham a gift and he sends him on his way, and I love the sarcasm with which he does that. This is verse 16. This is Abimelech. He says: *To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother -- big air quotes around that -- a thousand pieces of silver. It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you, and before everyone you are vindicated."*

You see, we look at this whole process and we understand that Abraham has grown enormously but it's always been one step forward and two steps back, and this is clearly two steps back. Next week in Abraham part 2 we're going to look at Abraham's life at the



point where God's faith building program finally reaches its desired goal, and we're going to look at the key ingredient that God uses to get him there. So, yes, we're going to leave Abraham in the middle of a mess of his own making. But you know why this blesses me? It makes Abraham the father of our faith real. It blesses me to know that my God is incredibly patient. It encourages me to know that my God will not abandon me even when I mess up badly; and Abraham, he messed up badly. God responds as he's done repeatedly. And just like with that stumbling skater, he comes alongside him, he steadies him and he goes back into the crowd. He also lets the consequences of Abraham's bad decisions do their work as well. See Abraham is living out "now you see me, now you don't," and we get to see it unfold.

Now perhaps you're thinking, well, that may be fine for a big shot of the faith like Abraham, but I'm just a nobody. Welcome to the club. Now fast forward from Abraham all the way to the end of Jesus's public ministry to his interaction with another well known nobody. This is *Mark 12*, speaking of Jesus. It says: *And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him --* and that's a big deal when you call your disciples. He says stop, stop everything, you

need to come here, sit, you need to come hear what I have to say. And said to them, *"Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."*

So we ask how did Jesus know all about her financial status? Well the same way he knows about everything you and I have ever done including any cup of cold water we've ever given in his name. I mean every time we think our lives are too mundane to matter, we need to remember that Jesus said that not even a sparrow can fall outside of his purview and that the hairs on our head are all numbered. See, our big problem is that we simply can't fathom that the God of the universe loves us as much as he does but he does. He considers you so precious that he is determined to spend the rest of your life shaping and molding you into the very image of his Son. And for better or for worse, much of that shaping and molding will center around the idea of growing your capacity to walk by faith and not by sight and I'll be the first to tell you, it's not fun.

Next time you're feeling alone and abandoned by God remember God's promise in *Hebrews 13: For He Himself has said, "I WILL NEVER LEAVE YOU NOR FORSAKE YOU."* And realize that regardless what you

feel, he has promised he is right there beside you. If you're one of his sheep God is unfolding your own growth in faith because that's what he cares about most in your life. So pray God for the grace to see that. *In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith -- more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire -- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.* Let's pray.

*Father, we need to cling to the knowledge, to the truth that you never abandon us, you never leave us and there are plenty of times we feel, God, you're not there, the heavens are silent, you don't answer. Lord, let us understand, let us know, let us truly come to grips with the fact that you are always there, that "now you see me, now you don't" is part of what you want to grow in us something that is so precious to you that you call it "of more value than gold." So Lord, when we are in the midst of that feeling like God is gone, God is not here, give us the ability to trust in you, especially at that point and recognize that this is something precious that we can offer back to you. Give us the grace and the strength and the wisdom to do just that, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*