

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father & our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

TEXT- Genesis 15:1-2 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, 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?”

PRAY-Dear God, we thank you for the invitation to share our deepest concerns with you in prayer. May our prayers lead us to a deeper faith. Amen.

Abraham is known as a person of great faith. Prayer deepens our faith.

Honesty is essential to a meaningful prayer life. It is no wonder Abraham had such a strong faith. He told God exactly what he thought and felt.

Let us look at Abraham as an example of prayer and faith. We see person of great contrasts. His faith ran gamut between strength and weakness.

I. Abraham's Prayer and Faith

In Genesis 12:1-3 God made a covenant with Abram. The rest of the Old Testament evolves out of that covenant. God said, “I want you to go to the land that I will show you. I will bless you with land, descendants and blessings. Abram showed great faith by taking his family and going to Egypt.

In our first lesson for today God re-affirms the promise to Abram. “Your reward shall be very great.” Abram responds with “Yes, but.” “God I appreciate your promise and I believe it but it does not make sense. How can I be the father of a great nation at this age and be childless? Right now a slave is my only heir.”

God promises a son and descendants as many as the stars. Abram believed by taking God at his word.

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All was well but Sarai continued childless. So Abram took matters into his own hand. He had a child named “Ishmael” by Hagar. Although Sarai approved of this, she was jealous and mistreated Hagar.

At age 99 God re-affirmed the covenant with Abraham and Sarah. Circumcision was the sign of this covenant. It sounded good, but Sarah was childless.

Then one day 3 men visited Abraham and Sarah. Abraham was very hospitable to them. Before they left, they promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have a child before they returned. Sarah laughed. God said, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

God kept his word. Later Sarah was able to laugh with joy. She prepared a special meal one evening and lit a candle. Before they ate she said, “Abraham, I have something to tell you.”

Isaac means laughter. Oh how Abraham loved Isaac. God was good and faithful. How could he ever have doubted and had a son by Hagar?

Then God dropped a bomb. “Take you son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering.”

Whom did Abraham love more, God or Isaac?

So Abraham started walking to Moriah. He was too stunned to speak. Finally Isaac spoke, “My father, the fire and wood but where is the burnt offering?” Abraham could only say, “God will provide.”

God did provide a ram caught in the thicket. Abraham passed a severe test of faith. The test was not only the loss of his son. But God appeared to be a liar. If Isaac died, there wouldn't be any descendants. Then Abraham would not be the father of a great nation. Yet not to trust was the same mistake he made with Hagar. Abraham trusted and kept his relationship with God.

The point of the story for us in Lent is, “God spared Abraham's son, but God did not spare his own Son.”

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Prayer is the give and take that led Abraham to faith. Our faith is formed in the same way.

II. Our Prayer and Faith

Let us look at aspects of prayer that lead to faith. I am indebted to Phil Yancey's book on PRAYER for these ideas.

In the broader perspective some prayer are frivolous. We are late for an appointment, so we pray for a parking space. We pray for a sunny day for a soccer match while farmers are praying for rain on the same day. We pray for an A on a test on the way to school when we didn't study the night before. A chain-smoker prays for protection from lung cancer.

Such prayers seem frivolous compared to Jesus prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane where his sweat became like drops of blood.

When our prayers appear unanswered, we are not alone.

Moses pleaded with God to cross the Jordan River and enter the promised land. God refused him because of past experiences.

King David fasted for a week praying that his infant son would live. Because of his sin with Bethsheba, the child died.

Four people in the Old Testament prayed to die: Moses, Job, Jonah & Elijah.

God ignored their request.

Habbakuk prayed for deliverance from the Babylonians and Jeremiah prayed that Jerusalem would not be destroyed. Both prayers were unanswered.

Many people have experienced unanswered prayer.

Sometimes our faith is strengthened when our prayers are answered in a different way than we expect.

Jesus prayed all night before choosing his disciples. They weren't the cream of the crop. One betrayed him. Another denied him. When Jesus spoke of suffering, some of them got into an argument about a seat of honor in the Kingdom of God.

However, slowly but steadily they were transformed. After the resurrection they caught on to his mission. All but one suffered as Jesus.

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We must be careful deciding which prayers are answered and unanswered.

Martin Marty said, "I find the most offensive kind of prayer when 250 Marines get killed...and 4 survive, and their families go on television and say, "We really prayed, so they were spared.""

Wouldn't it be better to say, "We are thankful our son/daughter is a live". We are praying for the families who lost a loved one. They must be enduring great pain."

Prayer is a relationship more than a result. It is the assurance that God is with us in doing God's will no matter what happens, or no matter what we understand. The relationship is for faith to endure, meaning in suffering and faith to believe in a good & loving God.

Paul described it by saying he was afflicted but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed.

A man died of ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease) after a 7 year battle, as had his brother, mother grandfather, aunt and cousin.

At the funeral the family handed out a sheet of paper. On one side was written a verse from Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" On the other side was a verse from Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want."

We live between these two chapters. Our prayers are so honest we cry to God in our forsakenness and yet we are comforted by the Good Shepherd.

Lent centers on the cross. The cross assures us that Jesus Christ suffers with us and is victorious over that suffering in the resurrection. That is the relationship that God offers, and that is what we need.

I want to close with a quote from Yancey's book on PRAYER. P. 267

"I have learned to tell God exactly what I want regardless of how impossible it may sound. I pray for peace in the Middle East, for justice in Africa, for religious freedom in China and other countries, for an end to homelessness and racism in the U. S., because I earnestly desire those things-and moreover I believe God does too. Amen.