

Living the Story

A Study through Scripture

Introduction:

One of the challenges of doing an overview of the Bible, especially as the texts for this study have been structured, is being able to cover all of the material in such a short amount of time. Today, we have a total of sixteen chapters assigned, but certainly cannot cover all of those chapters in an hour long time together. Where this really becomes a challenge is when so many of the events that happen in the text are resolved or explained in a chapter somewhere else in the reading selection. Such is the case today. We are going to focus on Genesis 15, but there are moments within the entire section (Genesis 12-22 especially) that are key for helping explain the story.

Be sure to read through these texts (again, especially the Abraham story found in Genesis 12-22) to be familiar with what happens as you begin your discussion.

Summary of the Text:

The story of Abraham has several events we could focus on within our study. We are going to look at the covenant God makes with Abraham in chapter 15 and try to understand ways we understand and react to promises God makes to us. I think there are a couple of things in the Abraham story that will help us as we look at chapter 15.

First is the initial call of Abraham. Abraham is called by God to an unknown place and is promised that he will be made a great nation and his descendants would receive the land of Canaan (Genesis 12.1-7). It obviously takes a large measure of faith to pack up his family and everything he owns and then head out to an unknown place. I also wonder how well Abraham believed the idea that he would be the father of a great nation when at the time, he had no children of his own.

On two different occasions (Gen. 12.10-20 and 20.1-18) Abraham tells the rulers of a land he enters that his wife Sarah is his sister. (Technically, this is true (20.12), but this really is not the point.) Abraham's actions are deceptive, no doubt, but they also appear to have a sense of trying to control the situation at hand. I wonder if Abraham is remembering the promise of God and trying to stack the deck in his favor, keeping his wife safe so that the promised offspring will happen. If this is the case, it would seem that this is a moment of doubting the promise God has made because it relies on Abraham's trickery for the promise to come to completion.

We have another promise—really a reminder of the promise—in 13.14-17 when Lot has separated from Abraham and taken the best land. You begin to get a picture of Abraham acting on the original promise of God, moving to an unknown place in expectation of greatness, only to be stymied at every turn by one thing after another. We might have the tendency to minimize the faith Abraham had, but recognize that to Abraham, the fulfillment of this promise probably seemed like it was traveling down a road of one step forward, two steps back.

Chapter 16 is another huge moment in the Abraham story. God has just made a covenant with Abraham (we will look at this in a moment) and we are even told of Abraham's belief in God's promise. If that is the case, why do we find in the very next chapter that Abraham, at the urging of Sarah, takes her slave woman to produce offspring with her? To me, it is as if Abraham feels like saying: God, this one is a big one—you better

LESSON #2

Date: 09/16/2012

Text: Genesis 15

The Big Picture: When God promises to make Abraham a great nation and promises him a land for his descendants, does God need any help making that happen? Does Abraham—and us—have to map out how this thing is going to work for it to actually be fulfilled?

Materials Needed: none

let me take care of it. Abraham does not try to go in a different direction of the promise, he just tries to help it along based on his terms, not God's.

Chapter 22 finishes (For the most part. Abraham actually dies in chapter 23) the story of Abraham. In it, Abraham is instructed to offer Isaac, the son he loves who has finally come along as a fulfillment of the promise, and Abraham goes through with the sacrifice, right up to the moment he is about to kill Isaac. For me, this bookends the moment of faith we see in chapter 12 when Abraham leaves on a journey to an unknown place. It is not necessarily a fulfillment of the promise (we are only talking about the first generation here), but it is a moment of triumphant faith. It contrasts several moments in Abraham's life where he attempts to complete the story on his own terms. You wonder what this chapter would have looked like if Abraham had acted here like he did in chapter 16. The point, however, is that he did not.

There are a couple of things I want us to see about chapter 15, which is where we will focus our group time.

First, even as he is reminded by God of the Lord's promise to him, he has questions. I am not sure I would call this "doubt" as much as fairly logical questions, especially to one who seems intent on helping complete the promise. How can I be a great nation without any children? How do I know I will be able to possess this land you have promised? This seems to me to be human nature. God, you are promising things beyond what I can comprehend, so just how are they going to come to pass? The question for us is do we trust God to be our "very great reward" even though we may not see or know how it will happen.

Second, we may think the cutting of animals in two and walking between them strange (not to mention a little gross). It actually was a common way to establish a covenant between two individuals in the time of Abraham. The point was to say: "If I do not fulfill the covenant (we may understand the idea of an "agreement" better) I am making with you, may I be just like these animals here: cut in two." It is sort of like when as kids we made a promise "hope to die, stick a needle in my eye." I have never heard of a needle being actually stuck in someone's eye for not fulfilling the promise, but the thought of it certainly reinforces the severity of breaking the promise.

Multiple times throughout the Abraham story God promises to make him a great nation and that he and his descendants would be given the Promised Land. The reminders, I believe, allow us to understand God as one who fulfills that which he promises and he is the one who is able to make that happen. We do not have to do it for him; we need to simply obey what he calls on us to do.

Preparing for the Group Time:

Continue to focus on welcoming people into this "new" group. I recognize that some of our groups have many, if not all, of the same people in them, but a new year always deserves a fresh start. If you did not take the time to get to know people in your group last week, be sure to do so this week. Let them tell you something(s) about them and their connection with South Plains. As a group leader, be sure to listen closely and continue to reach out to the people in your group.

Also, if you did not begin to develop a group covenant, do so this week. I know I sound like I am harping on this, but I cannot express enough how beneficial such a covenant is down the road. Time and time again, I have seen groups falter or even disband who had no covenant. Those who did were able to navigate the struggles and end up successfully coming out the other side.

Living the Story

Lesson #2
Text: Genesis 15

Lesson Outline:

If you have added someone new to the group since last week or if the make up of your group has changed since last year, be sure that you have taken the time to get to know one another. Here are the questions again that I suggested might be good “getting to know you” questions:

- If you could be doing anything else besides being here at group, what would you want to be doing?
- What was the best small group experience you have ever had?
- How did you end up at South Plains?

Last week we discussed the idea of creating “garden” space or time, where we together with other followers of Jesus were able to enjoy fellowship with God and with one another. If you asked your group to do this, spend some time allowing your group to share how those times went.

To begin your discussion time, ask everyone in the group if they have every experienced a trust fall. (A trust fall is an exercise where someone stands on a platform and falls back into the arms of a group of people. The act of falling back and hoping they catch you is an act of trust.) If they have, let them share their experiences. What are other moments in your life when you had to move forward completely on trust?

Read, or have someone read, Genesis 15.

Go through the discussion questions

Ask your group to do the “Living the Story” activity this week.

Finish or continue to develop a group covenant with your group.

Close in prayer.

Discussion Questions:

When you read God say: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward,” how do you think Abram responded to this?

How do you respond to the promises God makes to you today? What promises of God to you do you hold valuable as you walk with him?

How do you see God as your “shield?” How do you see him as your “very great reward?” How are these two things connected?

In what ways is Abram’s questions to God a normal reaction? In what ways could this be considered a lack of faith?

What do we see that is different about the interaction between God and Abram here compared to in chapter 12 of Genesis when Abram was first called?

When God makes a promise to us, what sort of responsibility do we have in seeing that promised fulfilled? How does Abram’s life give us an example of what to—or what not to—do?

How do we distinguish between having faith that God will fulfill his promises, being committed to obedience to God, and trying to fulfill those promises for God (i.e. as Abram was prone to do at times)?

What is so bad about helping God out in fulfilling his promises in our life?

In what ways can you have more faith in God to fulfill his promises in your life?

For the Children:

The passage we are memorizing this week can be a valuable tool for our children to have to help them understand God's love for them. Although this was originally for Abram, we have many examples in Scripture where God is described as our shield and our reward. Be sure to have the children be a part of memorizing this passage and encourage them to continue to say it this week.

Try this in Group:

Memorize Genesis 15.1 during group. Have everyone in the group recite each line of this promise back to you as you lead it, as follows:

Do not be afraid. (Group: Do not be afraid.)
I am your shield, (etc.)
your very great reward

You might then go around the room having each person recite the next line. After you have completed the three lines, the next person starts over.

Living the Story:

This week continue to recite Genesis 15.1 as you go through your daily routine. When you begin to have doubt that God is present in your life or that his plans are the path you are choosing, recite the passage. When you begin to try and solve God's problems for him, recite the passage. When you have doubts that God is there or that he really loves you, recite the passage.

I hope that doing so will remind you of God's presence and his promises to you, as well as your commitment to follow him.

What's Next:

The congregational reading for this upcoming week (September 23) is Genesis 37-50. This is covered in *The Story* chapter 3. We will look primarily at the start of the Joseph story (chapter 37) and how that story ended (chapter 45).