

Hanging out With Heros

ABRAHAM

The Ups and Downs
of a friend of God



Lorraine
Peterson

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ABRAHAM: THE UPS AND DOWNS OF A FRIEND OF GOD

Introduction

If you like to keep all the bases covered and minimize your risks, the life of

Abraham will challenge you to break free and live by faith. If you thrive on stories of adventure and danger, reading about Abraham – and other heroes of faith – will teach you the difference between faith and foolishness. Either way you'll learn about faith. And since “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11: 6), these next chapters could change your life!

Obeying God When He Demands Sacrifice

God told Abraham to leave Ur, an important and prosperous city of ancient times, and go “to the land I will show you” (Genesis 12: 1). Going meant saying goodbye to everything familiar, to family and friends. It meant leaving a nice house in a thriving city and camping in a tent for the rest of his life! And when Abraham's friends asked him where he was going, he didn't know, because God hadn't told him. How embarrassing. Abraham was obeying purely by faith.

Making a Ridiculous Decision

After leaving Ur, Abraham spent several years in Haran. Finally, he reached Canaan, and there, at Shechem, he built an altar to God. Later he moved to Bethel.

Then famine struck Canaan. Egypt, however, had plenty of food because its water came not from local rainfall, but from the flooding of the Nile that gets its water supply from East Central Africa. Egypt often had crops when the rest of the area had none. Abraham therefore did what he thought was the logical thing: He moved to Egypt – and got into a lot of trouble with the king.

An ancient king was not above murdering the husband of a beautiful woman in order to add her to his harem. Well, Sarah, Abraham's wife, was beautiful. So in order to save his own skin, Abraham asked her to call herself his sister. Predictably, the king noticed her and brought her to the Egyptian palace, but he soon learned she was married. He swiftly exiled the couple from Egypt. What a foolish thing Abraham had done! But God forgave him, and Abraham learned from his dreadful mistake.

Good and Bad Solutions to Problems

Abraham's nephew, Lot, was still living with Abraham, and both had large herds and many servants. This led to conflict. Because adequate pasture for so many animals was scarce, their servants began quarreling. Abraham decided to solve the problem by giving Lot first pick and then taking whatever land was left for himself. Their families would then separate. Ungrateful Lot chose the best land for himself and left the scrubby desert for his uncle.

Childless at 86, Abraham received a promise from God: Abraham would have a son whose descendants would inherit the land of Canaan. Only faith could believe such a promise! Sarah was 76 at this time and found the promise hard to believe.

As years passed and no child appeared, Sarah gave up on a miracle. She resorted to the scheme used by childless wives of that day in order to insure that her husband had a son to carry on his name and to inherit his land. So, she suggested her maid Hagar bear a son for Abraham. (Hammurabi, a Babylonian king who lived about two hundred years after the time of Abraham, included this kind of arrangement in his law code. One of his laws stated that the childless wife was responsible to find a woman to produce an heir for her husband. If the wife failed to do this, her husband could legally take a second wife. It is very possible that Sarah and Abraham lived under such a system. Even if they didn't, it was an attempt to settle Sarah's insecurity, using a human method to fulfill a heavenly promise.) Abraham also showed his lack of faith by consenting to Sarah's plan. And so, he and Hagar produced a boy named Ishmael.

Ishmael caused nothing but trouble – and the problems continue to this day! Listen to the news and you'll hear about the descendants of Ishmael – the Arabs – fighting with the Jews. All this because Abraham and Sarah weren't willing to wait for God to provide them a son!

Yet God did not give up on Abraham and Sarah. When Abraham was 99 and Sarah was 89, Jesus made one of his Old Testament appearances. (The Bible

says, “The Lord appeared to Abraham.” Such an appearance of God to man is called a theophany. Most Old Testament scholars conclude that this was Jesus.) He announced that within a year Abraham and Sarah would have a son! When Sarah heard it she laughed, but she was reminded that nothing is too hard for God. And a year later she gave birth to Isaac, the miracle baby. He grew up to be an obedient boy who was a joy to his parents.

Then came another test of faith: God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the miracle boy, as a burnt offering on Mount Moriah. Yes, God had promised Abraham a son. And He had kept that promise by giving them Isaac. So why should He now want Abraham to destroy the fulfillment of the promise as a test of his faith? God didn’t want Isaac dead. He just wanted Abraham to trust Him without question. By the time Abraham faced this greatest test of his faith, he had grown beyond the mistakes he’d made in earlier years. He no longer doubted God. This time he obeyed without question, reasoning that God could even raise Isaac from the dead. Even if he couldn’t see his way clear, he could obey his way clear.

By giving a dramatic picture for your imagination (Isaac tied to a stone altar and Abraham, knife in his hand, ready to kill him), God demonstrated one of the premier principles of the Christian life: Spiritual life rises out of giving up to God everything you are and have. In other words, you must die to self. Yes, a substitute (for Isaac, a ram / for you, Jesus) did the physical dying. But in order to live a full, new life, you must act on the truth that the self-centered part of you died with Jesus on the cross. Only the things you sacrifice to God come back usable for His glory.

As a follower of God, you must offer each “Isaac” (your most precious possession) on the altar of your heart. This sacrifice will move your life into a new dimension, for you will no longer view lightly the blessings God has given you. Just as Isaac became dearer to Abraham after selfish love for his son had been destroyed, so God's blessings will become dearer to you.

In addition to giving a major spiritual lesson, the sacrifice of Isaac also points to the coming of Christ. Man needed a sacrifice for sin, but no Isaac or ram was good enough to be that sacrifice. We don’t know how much Abraham understood about Jesus, the perfect sacrifice, but he must have had some

knowledge, because Jesus said to doubting listeners, “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad” (John 8: 56).

To our modern mind, God's directing Abraham to sacrifice his son appears strange. You might be tempted to think God was commanding murder. It is doubtful, however, that Abraham ever thought, “How could God command me to do such a thing?” He lived in a society that commonly made child sacrifices to its gods. Since the Law of Moses had not yet been given, and since such an offering carried such strong religious significance, Abraham probably didn't even associate child sacrifice with murder. Certainly, the motives of hatred and revenge, which lead to conviction of murder in today's courts, were absent from these killings. Abraham's fellow countrymen, in their ignorance and desperation, gave their gods the best they had (in a crudely literal sense) – their sons and daughters. Certainly, worshipers of the true God could have sometimes thought. If pagans are willing to offer up their children to gods of wood and stone, the living God surely deserves such a sacrifice. Through Abraham's example, however, God showed the world, and especially the Israelites, that He detested human sacrifice. His warning to Abraham as the knife was poised above Isaac's throat, “Do not lay your hand on the lad,” erases any doubt about the matter.

But God didn't put Abraham through this ordeal only for the sake of others, to show them His attitude toward human sacrifice. He did it as a supreme test of Abraham's faith. Would Abraham give the person he loved the most to God? Would he obey God even though he didn't understand the purpose of God's command? Abraham passed.

Abraham's life is marked by faith. By faith he made significant journeys: from Ur to Canaan, from his tent to the altar on Mount Moriah, from paganism to belief in the one true God, Jehovah. By faith he became “God's friend” (James 2: 23). By faith he became righteous. (Romans 4: 22). And by faith you can be a child of Abraham, the father of God's chosen people, “the father of all who believe” (Romans 4: 11).

Free to Receive

“The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into 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 peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’ So, Abram left, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran” (Genesis 12: 1-4).

What if God asks you to break up with your boyfriend? What if you have to choose between going out for baseball and attending a series of great Bible studies and discipleship classes, that won't be offered again? What if you know you should stay home and attend the local junior college to ease your parents' financial load, even though you've been aching to get out on your own and attend the university? What if your mother needs help on Saturdays but you'd like to spend that time with your friends?

These decisions wouldn't be difficult if you have Abraham's faith. As Abraham, you must trust God enough to believe that if He takes something away from you, that it is for your good – that He has something better to give. This is part of the definition of faith in the great “faith chapter,” Hebrews 11. It says those who come to God must believe He “rewards those who earnestly seek him” (v. 6). Do you believe that? Until you do, your Christian life will be full of constant struggles. You will be a Linus with all kinds of security blankets you're unwilling to give up.

If you're still wavering on this issue, the faith of Abraham can encourage you. God asked Abraham to leave everything – his house, his family, his friends, and his country. But He promised that the whole world would benefit if Abraham obeyed. It certainly didn't seem logical, but as Epp writes, God “seldom accompanies His commands with reasons or explanations, but He always accompanies them with wonderful promises.” 1. Theodore Epp, *The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*. Lincoln, Nebr.: Back to the Bible.

God makes a similar promise to you: “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for me will save it” (Luke 9: 24). Do you believe it? Read the verse again, substituting your name for “whoever.”

No one would ever deny there is heartache in giving up something you value,

but the Bible never says obeying God is painless. Even though it must have been very difficult for Abraham to leave everything as he headed for an unknown destination, he believed God's promise. His obedience made possible the formation of the Jewish people through whom Jesus came into the world. Abraham, however, is not the only person who has given up everything to obey God and thus bless others. For instance, "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt *because he was looking ahead to his reward*" (Hebrews 11: 24-26). Moses' decision to sacrifice made possible the Israelites' escape from Egypt.

Are you willing to suffer, believing that God will reward you for your obedience? That obeying God in faith can lead to great and wonderful things? That God has a better life for you without your boyfriend? That getting to know Jesus better is more exciting than hitting home runs? That making sacrifices for other people will prove "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20: 35)? Only when you give up what you have in your hands can you be free to receive the greater gift God has for you.

The Apostle Paul, like Abraham, gave up what he had so he could receive better things from God:

"If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3: 4-8).

1. Make a list of each thing you might have to give up to follow Jesus. Can you give them up, believing God has something better to give you?
2. What did Paul think about all the things he gave up for Jesus?

3. Do you think giving up his great reputation may, at first, have been hard for Paul?
4. What lessons do the lives of Abraham, Moses, and Paul teach you?

About That F on the Faith Exam ...

“Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, ‘I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, “This is his wife.” Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you’” (Genesis 12: 10-13).

Have you ever wished the teacher would give you one big exam, and after you'd passed that one, you'd never have to take another test? Well, there are some problems with that dream. First, good learning requires constant review to prevent forgetting, and tests motivate you to review. (For example, every math exam tests concepts you have learned in lower grades, as well as the new concepts you've just learned.) Second, you never know if you've mastered the new material unless you've been tested. (There may have been times when you thought you knew a great deal – until a test proved you wrong.) Third, you learn a lot by taking an exam. Sometimes the question you get wrong on the test is the very thing you'll remember longest. Fourth, constant tests keep you studying and learning new things. If you want to follow God, you might as well get used to the idea of tests, because God uses them frequently. He tests faith for the same reasons that your teacher keeps giving exams.

The life of Abraham shows how – and how not – to take God's tests. Abraham's test, in this case, was a famine. A food shortage is a pretty serious problem, but Abraham's experience should have kept him from panic. God had provided for Abraham all the way from Ur to Canaan, a distance of several miles. Abraham had also enjoyed God's protection and His guidance. Therefore, the famine was only a review test for Abraham. But he failed.

A faith test is like a math test. If you use the wrong formula, you get all the problems wrong. The formula for solving faith problems is asking God what to do, then obeying Him out of faith rather than fear. In other words, attitude is all-important. The Apostle Paul told the Roman Christians what that attitude should be: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15: 13).

Abraham failed because he used the wrong formula. He decided to solve the problem with his own plan – he moved to Egypt, which had plenty of food. What a bad trip! First, he gave up the opportunity to learn to trust God more. Then he sinned to protect himself by indicating that Sarah was his sister and not his wife. (Sarah was very beautiful, and in those days, marriage was so highly respected that even a king couldn't take another man's wife. He could, however, murder anybody he wished. Thus, by making a beautiful woman a widow, he could take her into his harem.) Abraham fell, not only into fear and insecurity, but into selfishness that cared more about his own safety than his wife's welfare. This test showed Abraham that his faith was still weak, that he didn't know God as well as he thought he did. Failing a test, however, is not nearly as important as your attitude about failing. Abraham failed but he learned from his mistakes. He admitted he was wrong, faced humiliation, and returned to face the famine and trust God. Are you willing to be humble, to admit you are wrong, and go back and find out how to do the math problems (or the faith problems) correctly? Will you let God teach you from your failures?

The test also showed Abraham he needed to stay close to God so he could learn whatever was necessary to pass the next test. You, too, will have faith tests all your life. Learn all you can from God's Word. Let the Holy Spirit be your guide. If you learn from your mistakes, you won't have to flunk the next faith exam.

“Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid” (Proverbs 12: 1).

“He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds

correction is honored” (Proverbs 13: 18).

“He who heeds discipline shows the way to life, but whoever ignores correction leads others astray” (Proverbs 10: 17).

“He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding. The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor” (Proverbs 15: 32, 33).

“Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12: 10, 11).

1. Are you stupid by God's definition? Do you have some changing to do?
2. What are the rewards for accepting discipline and correction?
3. Why is it hard to admit that you are wrong and receive correction?
4. What’s the best way to avoid an *F* on the next faith exam?

Go-For-It Faith

“The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, ‘Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you’” (Genesis 13: 14, 15, 17).

You’ve just passed your driver’s test and are ecstatically waiting for a chance to prove your skill as a licensed driver. Your grandmother congratulates you.

“I'm very proud of you. I know you'll be a safe and careful driver – not like other teenagers.”

“Well, I do have an appointment with the doctor this afternoon, but – uh – I couldn’t ask you to do that. It’ll be during the worst rush-hour traffic of the day. I’ll call a cab.”

Crushed, you realize your grandmother has no faith in your driving ability – in spite of her encouraging comments. The words of faith must be acted on, or they mean nothing.

A simple man of great faith, named (don't laugh) Smith Wigglesworth, compared inactive faith to a robber who steals the good things God wants to give us. Faith doesn't drift along with the current, hoping things will turn out okay. Instead, it gets the map from God and follows the course with enthusiasm. It takes command of the situation, rides the rapids with God as co-pilot, and enjoys it – all the while letting God take you to the destination.

Faith requires initiative but doesn't independently venture out. That is presumption. Because of this danger, the "go-for-it" element of faith is often overlooked. Abraham had to "go-for-it." God gave him the promise of the land, but God asked him to walk through the land, to claim it by a specific act of obedience. Theodore Epp lists the requirements of "go-for-it" faith: – Theodore H. Epp, *Moses, Vol. 1, God Prepares His Man*. Lincoln, Nebr.: Back to the Bible, pp. 10, 11.

1. Helplessness – the realization that you can't please God by doing things in your own way or by your own strength.
2. Assurance – confidence that you are doing God's will and not your own.
3. Commitment – surrender of your desires, plans, and ideas to God.
4. Scripture – a passage of Scripture, a promise of God you can claim for the situation and keep in your mind regardless of feelings or circumstances.
5. Boldness – daring to act, depending only on God's promises.

If you haven't taken the first four steps, your actions won't be based on faith. Usually, however, the problem is you never get to step five and thus miss the blessing. You do everything except thanking God and acting. God wants to give you "go-for-it" faith.

Now put it into practice. You and your mother have fought a hundred times about how often you are to stay home and take care of your younger brother and sister. The matter, still unsettled, sits like a bomb ready to explode. You must resolve the problem. First, admit to God that you're helpless, and in

faith ask Him for the solution. Second, face God's word – “Children, obey your parents” (Ephesians 6: 1) – and realize disobeying your mother is never God's will. Third, give up your own desires and be willing to babysit every night – if that is God's plan. Fourth, find a Bible verse, a promise to claim (for example, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”). Fifth, thank God that He wants to make you a peacemaker and that He has already done that. Then go with faith to your mother and discuss the babysitting situation. That’s “go-for-it” faith. You have no need to fear; God rewards those who obey Him.

“Then Joshua told the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you.’ And the Lord said to Joshua, ‘Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses. Tell the priests who carry the Ark of the Covenant: (The special gold-covered box containing tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments showing the covenant or agreement God had made with His people.) ‘When you reach the edge of the Jordan’s waters, go and stand in the river.’” So, when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant went ahead of them. Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during the harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water’s edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Araba (the Salt Sea) was completely cut off. So, the people crossed over opposite Jericho” (Joshua 3: 5, 7, 8, 14-16).

1. How would you feel if you had to lead a million people across a flooding river and you had no boats?
2. Why did the people “sanctify” themselves (set themselves apart for God's special purpose)?
3. How did Joshua know this crossing was God's will? (If you read all of Joshua 3, you'll also find God had promised Joshua a dry crossing.)
4. What was the importance of breaking camp and having the priests step into the flooding river before seeing any results? Ask God to show you which situation in your life will require believing God's

promise and acting in faith before you'll see signs of God working.

The Faith-Obedience Plan

“So Abram said to Lot, ‘Let’s not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let’s part company. If you go to the left, I’ll go to the right; if you go to the right, I’ll go to the left’ ... The king of Sodom said to Abram, ‘Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself.’ But Abram said to the king of Sodom, ‘I have raised my hand to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the thong of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, “I made Abram rich”’” (Genesis 13: 8, 9; 14: 21-23).

Why do you obey? You might answer that no one gets through life without obeying somebody sometime. And you're right. But such an attitude won't do much for your life because the quality of life you'll have depends on the *reasons* you have for obeying.

Consider the variation in your attitudes toward certain tasks. You follow your English teacher's instructions for writing a term paper to the letter to avoid getting an F – and hate her all the time you are doing it. You obey crabby Aunt Bessie's instructions for mowing the lawn because your mother said it's your duty – but you can't stand Aunt Bessie. But when your girlfriend gives you strict instructions on impressing her grandparents, you obey because you love her and trust her – and you enjoy doing it! You know she won't lead you astray, and you have a good reason for gaining the confidence of her grandparents. As you can see, obedience can be out of fear, out of duty, or out of love and faith.

People obey God for different reasons. Some forget that their relationship with God and their motives for obeying Him are as important as the obedience itself. They obey God only because they are afraid of what He will do to them if they don't obey. Or they just do their duty. Obviously, these people don't consider God their intimate friend. This is as absurd as a wife obeying her husband only out of fear or duty. Obedience that comes from

love and faith is the only kind that satisfies. If you obey God because you know He loves you completely and has your best interests at heart, obeying is easy. Obedience doesn't have to be a drag. It wasn't for Abraham.

Just casually reading about Abraham's generosity to Lot might convince you he was a very poor businessman, or that he was a good guy with a white hat who went around doing unselfish things because that's what good guys are supposed to do. Actually, Abraham's generosity came neither from ignorance nor from duty. Instead, he obeyed in faith. He knew that the God who loved him owned everything, so God would take good care of him, even if Lot received first choice of the land. And he knew better than to place his confidence in the generosity of people, such as the king of Sodom who wanted to give him gifts. "Lest you should say, 'I made Abram rich,'" reveals Abraham's attitude. He loved God and had full confidence in Him, not in people. He chose to obey God because God would give him the very best. Abraham knew that accepting presents from the powerful king of Sodom could obligate him to that king. Abraham wanted to be obligated only to God.

Abraham's view of material possessions clearly shows an obedience based on faith. First, Abraham left a big, beautiful house in Ur. (We can safely assume this because archaeologists have uncovered foundations of spacious homes in ruins of the ancient city.) Second, he lived in a tent. A tent won't hold much, so a person can't store up anything for the future. He must trust God for his needs each day. Abraham believed that the God who owned the whole world had plenty of riches to supply his needs. So, in faith he obeyed God's instructions.

Abraham found that the faith-obedience plan worked very well. You must try it. Put God first and trust Him for your worn-out wardrobe, your empty billfold, or your school tuition. He will take care of you.

"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So, do not worry, 'What shall we

eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6: 28-33).

1. What kind of relationship with God can take worry out of your life?
2. What is the difference between putting God and His kingdom first because of obligation, and doing it because of love and faith?
3. What is God really like? Do you think of Him like that?

Is Your God as Good as His Word?

“Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; so, she said to Abram, ‘The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her.’ Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So, Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael” (Genesis 16: 1,2, 15).

Someone has said, “Hope says, ‘God will do it,’ but faith says, ‘God has already done it.’” That is a statement of confidence. If you really trust someone when he says, “I’ll do it,” you can declare, “It’s as good as done.”

You probably have friends you trust implicitly, but do you include God in that category? Imagine God’s great disappointment when He sees the puny faith you put in Him. How preposterous to think God needs your help to fulfill His promises. How silly to grow discouraged if you don’t see God’s answer right away. This implies that God has forgotten all about His promises! What God has said is as good as done. Although you realized the logic of trusting an all-powerful, all-wise, all-loving God to carry out His promises, you probably succumb to the human tendency to figure things out for God and give Him some help. Even Abraham, a great man of faith, was

guilty of this.

When God promised Abraham a son, he was 86 years old – and his wife was 76. Only a miracle could make this happen. As years passed, however, and the promise remained unfulfilled, Abraham and Sarah began to wonder. They didn't have enough faith to believe that a promise from God was as good as done. Therefore, they slipped into the world's way of thinking – “God helps those who help themselves.”

According to the law code of Hammurabi (a king who lived 200 years after Abraham), if a wife was childless, she was expected to find a woman who could produce a son for her husband. If the wife didn't find such a woman, the husband could legally bring home a second wife. This official law, written 200 years after Sarah's time, was probably a social custom in her day. Such a custom probably made her insecure about her status as a wife, and she allowed this fear to get the best of her – after all, Abraham could bring home some beautiful young woman any day. So, Sarah advised Abraham to have a son by her maid, Hagar. This was the logical, culturally acceptable way to solve the problem.

Unfortunately, Abraham never asked God what was right. It never dawned on him that God was true to His word and had already decided how to fulfill His promise of a son for Abraham. Probably, Abraham and Sarah both thought they were helping God fulfill the promise.

What a disaster! Not only did Sarah and Hagar become enemies, but their sons, Isaac and Ishmael, became enemies. To this day, the sons of Ishmael (the Arabs) are still fighting the sons of Isaac (the Jews). Abraham and Sarah's sin of unbelief had terrible consequences. But God didn't give up on them. He forgave them, built up their faith, and sent them a son when Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90 – an even greater miracle than it would have been before.

Now compare yourself with Abraham and Sarah. When God says, “So do not fear, for I am with you” (Isaiah 41: 10), do you believe He can help you pass final exams without one second of worrying on your part? When God says, “By His (referring to Jesus) wounds you *have been* healed” (1 Peter 2: 24), do you trust Him to make you healthy without your deciding exactly when

and how He will do it? When God says, “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion” (Philippians 1: 6), do you still insist you must have a good-looking husband, a BMW, and a big bank account? To “help” God is to distrust Him. Because He is the most trustworthy person in the universe. He doesn’t need any help. Whatever He has promised isn’t “as good as done”; it’s *already done*. Your God is as good as His word.

“The centurion replied, ‘Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, “Go,” and he goes; and that one, “Come,” and he comes. I say to my servant, “Do this,” and he does it.’ When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, ‘I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith’” (Matthew 8: 8-10).

1. This Roman soldier realized that once Jesus gave His word, the thing was as good as done. Do you believe the same?
2. Why was the Roman soldier satisfied, though he hadn’t seen his servant healed?
3. Why was Jesus so impressed with this man’s faith?
4. Find a promise in the Bible that applies to a problem you are facing. By faith believe that Jesus has already done what He said He would.

Stop Laughing and Start Listening

“The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Then the Lord said, ‘I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.’ Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So, Sarah laughed to

herself as she thought, 'After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?' Then the Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh and say, "Will I really have a child, now that I am old?" Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son'" (Genesis 18: 1, 10-14).

How would you react if someone suggested something impossible? With laughter? If someone said you could get rid of your explosive temper, would you laugh and exclaim, "Me? Never!"? If someone suggested you could be organized, calm, and efficient, would you treat it as a big joke and excuse yourself with, "Once a scatterbrain, always a scatterbrain"? Would you chuckle if your English teacher said you could overcome your shyness and become a great speaker? Do you picture yourself still biting your fingernails in some rest home someplace down the road? "Impossible" is sometimes spelled L-A-U-G-H-T-E-R.

You're not the only one who uses laughter to cover up lack of faith. Sarah did, too. When Jesus made one of His Old Testament appearances and told Abraham (who was then 99) that within a year he and Sarah (then 89) would have a son, Sarah laughed. (Of course, the idea of a woman having a child at 90 is rather funny.) The Lord reminded Sarah that she was forgetting that God was all-powerful – "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" This made Sarah think about an omnipotent God and helped build up her faith. The Bible says, "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10: 17). That is what happened to Sarah. She listened to the message the Lord gave and believed it. Her laughter turned to listening, and through listening she learned faith.

God could have formed Isaac in heaven and sent him down in a blanket, but that's not His way. He performs His impossible miracles through ordinary people – such as you – who believe Him. So Sarah, at age 90, gave birth to a beautiful, healthy boy. And she named him Laughter – that is what Isaac means. Maybe she chose the name to remind herself that this living miracle was once a laugh of unbelief.

You, too, must leave behind your laugh of unbelief and begin listening to the

words of a God who can do anything. You must learn to trust Him completely. Nothing is too hard for God – not even your temper, your disorganization, your shyness, or your gnawed fingernails! Stop laughing right now and start listening.

“God also said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.’ Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, ‘Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?’” (Genesis 17: 15-17).

“Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about a hundred years old – and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why ‘it was credited to him as righteousness’” (Romans 4: 18-22).

1. How did Abraham get from laughter to believing?
2. Why is it good to come to the place where there is NOTHING you can do about the situation?
3. Why did Abraham praise God BEFORE the miracle took place?
4. Work on your own faith project. What seems so impossible now that the very idea makes you laugh? Is there anything too hard for God? Keep listening to God and His words and learning to trust Him for the impossible.

Mighty Miracles and Mickey Mouse

“Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ ‘Here I am,’ he replied. Then God said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom

you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.' Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey ... When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, 'Abraham! Abraham!' 'Here I am,' he replied. 'Do not lay a hand on the boy,' he said. 'Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son'" (Genesis 22: 1-3, 9-12).

It's hard to read the account of Abraham starting out early in the morning to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice, in obedience to God's command, without something pulling at your heartstrings. (For a fuller discussion of this strange command of God, read the introduction to these chapters on Abraham.)

Abraham's faith should fill you with awe; his faith was so mature, so serene, that he did not question God, or even procrastinate. Abraham knew God so well he couldn't help but trust Him. The Bible doesn't indicate Abraham had any fear. Instead, he looked at the situation in the light of his close acquaintance with God; and he reasoned that God could raise Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11: 19).

The greatest evidence of Abraham's solid faith was the confidence of Isaac, by this time a teenager and stronger than his father. (Note that Isaac, not Abraham, carried the wood up the mountain.) Isaac must have caught his father's miracle-believing faith, because he allowed himself to be bound to the altar when he easily could have escaped. If Abraham had been obeying God out of obligation or tradition, Isaac would have pointed out that this was a good time to break with tradition and do some independent thinking! But tradition wasn't Abraham's motive. He believed that God could do anything and he trusted God's judgment. So, he and Isaac counted on a miracle, and that's what they got.

You need the mature faith that Abraham displayed, faith that counts on miracles in impossible situations. You need mature faith especially when your emotions are deeply involved – such as having to sacrifice the son you

love. Abraham could easily have let his love for Isaac keep him from obeying God. Instead, his belief in God's power enabled him to obey in spite of his emotions.

You may be facing several “mouse in a maze” situations in which you cannot obey God unless you are expecting miracles. For instance, how can you follow God's command “Children, obey your parents” (Ephesians 6: 1) if your alcoholic father becomes utterly unreasonable? Only by expecting a miracle. How can you practice “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalms 46: 10) when there is constant tension and arguing in your home? Only by expecting a miracle. How can you “love your enemies” (Matthew 5: 43) when your non-Christian family and classmates constantly ridicule and tease you? Only by expecting a miracle. (Remember that God is free to work whatever miracle He wishes. He may choose to make you strong and courageous, rather than dealing with the people who are causing your problems.)

No matter how difficult your predicament, it is not too difficult for God. You may feel as if you were Mickey Mouse caught in the world's biggest mousetrap, but whoever said that mighty miracles and Mickey Mouse don't go together?

“How great is your goodness, that you have stored up for those who fear you, which you bestow in the sight of men on those who take refuge in you. In the shelter of your presence you hide them from the intrigues of men; in your dwelling you keep them safe from the strife of tongues” (Psalms 31: 19, 20).

“Therefore, let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him. You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance” (Psalms 32: 6, 7).

1. Write down the promises in the above verses that assure you of mighty miracles for tough situations.
2. In what situations do you need to allow God to keep you safe “from the strife of tongues”?

3. In what situation do you need to be “encompassed (surrounded) with deliverance”?
4. What miracle can you expect from God this week?