

- When I was a middle schooler and I had to sit in the service and listen to preaching, I remember being very bored. We did not have phones or devices (I wouldn't have been allowed to have this during the service anyway) so I would read. Since the only book I was allowed to bring to church was my bible, that's what I read. My favorite stories would be to go back into the Old Testament (the first half of the bible) and read stories. Stories of kings and prophets. Of battles and giants. Of heroes and villains. Of intrigue, spies, assassinations, and more.
- I could never understand those who wanted to ignore the Old Testament.
- As I got older, I came to understand that the bible is more than a collection of stories and sayings.
- The bible, or Scripture, is the story of God. The focus of the entire bible is God's working in the world. It is about his work in creating all things, his plans in response to how humanity messed up that perfect creation, and his work in redeeming humanity.
- Along the way, there are countless accounts of how people related to God in this process. We see how people interacted with God and his story, how they responded to God in both good and not-so-good ways, and the results.
- The focus is always on God himself, but there are so many things we can learn from observing and examining these interactions.
- We are going to look at specific stories of different people from the Old Testament and how they did this.
- Despite being in a different cultural context, their stories mirror ours in so many ways.
- Over the next couple of months, we are going to examine:
  - Gideon
  - Ruth
  - Daniel
  - Elijah
  - David & Absalom
  - Esther
- Today I want to begin with one of the most famous. Abraham.
- Historically, Abraham is the key figure in three major world religions. He is revered in the Jewish and Muslim faiths as well as Christianity and is considered the father of them.
- I wonder what goes through your mind when you hear about Abraham?
- Leaving his home and traveling to the unknown?
- Having a baby when he's old?
- Having to offer his son Isaac?
- Being the father of nations?
- What kind of person do you think he is?
- He is referred to frequently as a person of great faith.
- In fact, when the writer of Hebrews lists all the amazing people of faith from the OT, they spend more time on Abraham than any other person.
- There is sometimes this feeling that we could never have done what Abraham did.
- The pinnacle of that faith was when God asked Abraham to offer his only son Isaac as an offering to him and Abraham obeyed. Even though God stopped him before he harmed his son, we think, "There is no way I could ever have offered my child as a sacrifice. I will never have the faith like he did. In fact, I have trouble with my faith often in my life when it does not seem to be working out."
- Ever been there? Where you faced constant rejection? Or chronic illness? A demanding boss? Nagging unemployment?

- You know, where life seems unbearable, where circumstances are hopeless and God seems inactive? Where our well-intentioned friends tell us to just “trust God.”
- And we think, “That’s easy for you to say. You don’t understand.”
- Our faith might seem weak. We might be inclined to walk away from God. We have friends or relatives who have exactly that.
- But when we think of this, we look are looking at the end of the story. Abraham did not start out with this kind of faith. In fact, his faith in God was pretty weak at the beginning and he made a lot of mistakes along the way. His faith journey was a bumpy one.
- We can identify with him a lot more than we think we can.
- When you read how he interacted with God throughout is life we come to this conclusion: **FAITH GROWS BY GIVING GOD YOUR YES.**

- Let’s go to the beginning where it all begins with an instruction and a promise.
- Abraham (called Abram still) lived in the land of Ur, which later became Babylon and is now Iraq. It was the a major metropolitan area. It was where everything was happening. It was the center of commerce, religion and much else.
- It was the place to be to make money and live your life fruitfully and profitably.  
*Genesis 12:1 The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. 2 “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. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*  
*faith.*

- Unlike Noah, who was considered a righteous man, there is nothing about Abraham that caused God to select him. His father and family were not god-fearing people. Joshua gives us a little window into Abraham.

*Joshua 24:2 Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods. 3 But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants.*

- Abraham did not believe in the one true God yet God, for reasons known only to him, reached down and picked Abraham and made him a promise and told him to leave where he was and go to a place he would show him. He told him to leave his family, to leave his home, to leave everything he knew and was comfortable with, including his financial security, and move.
- In one sense, the command of God to Abram was very specific. Abram was told in detail what he must leave behind. He must leave his country, his relatives, and his father’s house.
- On the other hand, God’s command was deliberately vague. While what was to be left behind was crystal clear, what lay ahead was distressingly devoid of detail: “... to the land which I will show you.” As the writer to the Hebrews put it, “... he went out, not knowing where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8).
- So Abraham moved. He said yes!
- Where is God asking for your yes? To move? To have a conversation with someone? To start giving of your money to something or someone? To stop a habit or living situation that is not good for you? To get involved in children’s ministry?
- It can be scary to give God your yes. But know that:

## I. God responds to imperfect faith.

- Abraham left Ur, turned his back on a great metropolis, setting out by faith for a land about which he knew little or nothing and which could probably offer him little from a standpoint of material benefits.
- The reason God responds to an imperfect, not fully formed faith, is that he is far more interested in us than the results of our faith.
- Abraham's faith was a fledgling, developing faith.
- You see, he listened to God, but he did not do everything God said.
- A) He left his country and his people but not his father's household. In fact, his father Terah traveled with them.
- B) And he did not go all the way to Canaan, but he stopped in Haran, about halfway there. He settled down and lived there until the death of his father, which happened when he was 75 years old.
- C) He traveled to Canaan and settled there like God had told him, but then a famine came and so he continued on to live in Egypt because that was where he could get food. He abandoned the land God promised because he figured it would be better somewhere else.
- This ended up being a debacle, because he was worried that Pharaoh or some powerful person would want his beautiful wife Sarah and kill him, so he lied and said she was his sister. Pharaoh took her into his harem. But then what would happen if she got pregnant – God had said God would bless Abraham through his own child.
- God intervened before anything could happen. He sent a plague on Pharaoh who finds out about Sarah and sends them on their way and they travel back to where they should have been in the first place.
- God continues to take the initiative. He continues to protect, lead, and fulfill his promises. Abraham said yes but as he imperfectly follows God and wrestles with his own issues of control, God continues to work in him. His relationship with God continues to grow as a result. He sees God's faithfulness and he learns to trust more.
- While all this is going on, God continues to reiterate his promise to Abraham.

*Genesis 13:14 The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. 15 All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. 16 I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. 17 Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you."*

- His **FAITH IS GROWING AS HE GIVES GOD HIS YES.** God is giving him promises. If this was all there was to it, most of us could have a growing, faith.
- But Abram & Sarai had a significant problem.

*Genesis 16:1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children.*

- God has given Abraham a promise (Genesis 15:2-4). A promise that he would have a son. But time has passed. His wife Sarah is old. He is old. There is no way that a son would be borne now.
- Only someone who wants children and has done everything to get pregnant and is still childless will understand the depth of the pain of Abraham and Sarah.
- Not only was God's entire promise, the whole reason they left home in Babylon so many years early, based on this promise, but their own legacy, the joy of family, their standing in society, was all being taken away because of a lack of children.
- What do you do when you are saying yes and life feels unbearable, when circumstances are hopeless, and God is inactive.

## II. Lack of clarity is a temptation to stop saying yes.

- This is particularly true when things are not going according to plan or expectations.
- Instead of saying yes to God, we retrench, we dig in, we protect ourselves. We are going to take control because God is not holding us his part.

*But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar;*

- They resorted to the typical option available in their day.
- We don't know, but I wonder if the slave came from the time spent in Egypt where they should never gone in the first place? Hmmm.

*Genesis 16:2 so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said. 3 So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. 4 He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.*

- This was not a bad thing. It was what you did when you couldn't get pregnant. It was common sense. It was accepted wisdom. People did not question this strategy. It was a good strategy. Here's the thing: The good option is not always God's option.
- We have to ask ourselves:
- Is this decision motivated by a lack of faith?
- Is it my way of making things work out?
- Is it energized by my own understanding, ingenuity, or strength?
- What you CAN do may not be what you SHOULD do.
- Good options are not always God's options.
- The result?
- **What they thought would solve the problem actually made life worse.**
- It led to trouble between Hagar & Sarah (16:4). There was jealousy and envy. Hagar began to feel superior and despise Sarah. They didn't get along. There was conflict.
- It led to trouble between Sarai & Abram (16:5). Sarah blamed Abraham. She found fault and the marriage was rocky.
- It led to trouble between Ishmael & Isaac (21:9). Later when Isaac was finally born, there was mocking and slander and brother strife such that Hagar and Ishmael had to be sent away. Looking down the year, it led to problems between Arab and Jews
- **Doing things your own way causes more trouble.**
- The solutions that we come up with that are derived from our own way of making life work, our own coping mechanisms, our own understanding, usually end up making matters worse.
- Doing things your own way causes more trouble.
- I have a problem so I better solve it.
- I have a need and God isn't meeting it so I will.
- I cannot wait for God to act so I'm getting involved now.
- I better get on it because it doesn't seem like God is.
- I don't like God's answer so I'm doing it my way.
- **FAITH GROWS BY GIVING GOD YOUR YES,** even when you lack clarity.
- And if we continue the story of Abraham, we learn that:

## III. It's never too late to say yes to God.

- Despite his frequent missteps, mistakes, attempts to take control, Abraham continues to do his best to give God his yes.
- And in the end, at the age of 100, improbable as it might be, Isaac was born to him and Sarah.

- When God appears and tests Abraham by asking him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, Abraham has had decades of learning to say yes. The difficulty of this test exceeds all the others, but his faith has grown to something amazing.
- **FAITH GROWS BY GIVING GOD YOUR YES.**
- We lose weight by eating better one day at a time.
- We get a degree by going to school and taking a class at a time.
- We become accomplished at music or a sport by doing the same things over and over.
- You want to become a person whose faith is powerful, strong and informs all you do?
- Then practice every day giving God your yes.
  
- Despite all the ups and downs of Abraham's life, when he is remembered, two things come up regularly.
- Abraham was a man of faith (Hebrews 11)
- Abraham was God's friend. (James 2:23)
- As you go through this year, practice giving God your yes.
- If you mess it up, then do it next time. God responds to faith, even imperfect faith.
- When you are tempted to take control because things are not like you want, step back and reaffirm your yes to God.
- Start today. Up your game today. It's never too late.
- I can think of no higher honor than to be called a man of faith who was God's friend.
- Where is God asking for your yes? Give it to him.