

Lesson Eleven

Review from Previous Lesson: In Lesson Ten we traced the phases of faith, which not surprisingly have a three-part structure: promise, contradiction, and resolution. We looked in detail at the life of Abraham, the “father of the faithful,” and saw this tripartite structure in his life.

As we examined what it might look like for someone to walk in the footsteps of Abraham, we discovered that often a completed three-phase structure, once having reached resolution by the action of God, can form a foundation for the next three-phased testing of faith.

The Problem: Most people who have been presented with the idea of the Phases of Faith are struck by the fact that this three-part testing of faith occurs throughout Scripture. Many express that just knowing this concept is like a roadmap that helps to “orient” them in mental, spiritual and emotional ways.

However, merely keeping this structure at the abstract level – as a “concept”—isn’t very helpful when we find ourselves in the middle of a very real contradiction. Living through a contradiction and doing so in a manner that honors God is very difficult.

Why the problem persists in churches: Most people do not recognize that faith has phases, and do not have the language nor the Biblical background to see their own personal trials as contradictions to the promises of God (and thus subject to resolution by Him, if they are faithful.)

Underlying Assumptions As Expressed in Everyday Language:

1. I’ve never known or heard of anyone who’s been in the kind of mess I’m in.
2. What am I supposed to do when I’m facing cold, hard facts that don’t square with what God has promised believers? Am I supposed to balance the two?
3. Being in a contradiction requires that you either pull yourself out of it, or just grit your teeth and bear up under it.
4. I feel that my situation could go on forever, and I’m not sure God is doing anything to change it.

Background Reading Before Teaching This Lesson: Review again the life of Abraham in Genesis chapter 11:26 through Genesis 22:19. (To save time, the sections of this reading which have directly to do with the lesson are: Genesis 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, and 22.)

Look also at Romans chapter 4 and Hebrews 11:8-19.

As you read, take note of the ways that Abraham acted when he was in the “contradiction” stage of his life.

The Lesson

We will look this week to the life of Abraham for six Biblical ways to deal with a contradiction. (We will continue next week with six more.)

1. **Look to the Lord.** Many times in a contradiction, we try to add up our options and count up our resources and see what we can do. While the Lord doesn't want us to be lazy or to ignore our responsibilities, He doesn't want the situation to be the focus of our attention. *He* wants to be the focus of our attention. A contradiction is a training ground to teach us to look up. James 5:13 says, "Is any of you in trouble? He should pray." That's the focus we should have. In fact, all the situations of life—being happy, being in trouble, being sick—are listed in James 5 as having only one solution—looking to the Lord to resolve the situation (or in the case of happiness, looking to Him to praise Him.)
2. **Know the marks of a contradiction.** A contradiction is a situation that directly opposes a promise or statement from God. Most generally, a contradiction is very "factual," demanding that we acknowledge its reality; clamoring for our attention. In the case of Abraham, he faced the fact, Scripture tells us, that he and Sarah were physically unable to have a child together. In a contradiction, you don't have to try to "explain away" a circumstance that you can see, feel, touch, taste, hear, and measure – it's real, all right.
3. **Elevate the promise above the contradictions.** The first way we can do this is by making a mental decision about the importance of the promise. In Romans 4:20, this mental decision is pictured. It says of Abraham that "he did not waver in unbelief regarding the promise of God." Actually, what the Greek says is, "he did not decide against the promise of God by unbelief" – he thought about it, and made a decision. That decision is reflected in the fact that Abraham "considered Him faithful who had made the promise" –Hebrews 11:11.

In the midst of a contradiction, we must stay close to the Lord and remember His promises. We have something Abraham didn't have—even though the Lord spoke specific promises to him several times, we have a whole book of promises that God swears He'll keep to us! And we can like the believers of Malachi's time talk to one another about the Lord. Thus we have two resources even Abraham didn't have to be able to focus on the promises to us. In times of trial, we can write down all the promises God has made that pertain to such a situation, and elevate those in prayer and in our daily speaking to others about it. Think what a difference this would make in Christian households if moms and dads in financial or other trouble told their children and each other, "God promised to take care of us, and I'm willing to take the repercussions of anything I've brought on myself and trust Him to provide for us."

4. **Learn to think non-naturally.** This is what Abraham did. When he tried to reason in a natural way, the solutions to his childlessness problem were: adopt Eliezar of Damascus or have a child by an Egyptian woman. Each of those

solutions was not what God had in mind. Abraham saw that God works non-naturally—having a son when you're a hundred years old is not natural! So by the time another contradiction surfaced in his life, that of taking Isaac up on a mountain to sacrifice him, Abraham already knew that non-natural reasoning was his only way to use his mind. We must learn to give up the habit of speculating on “natural” ways we can solve our own problems, and learn as Abraham did that we should depend upon Him to help us. And then when a non-natural solution comes about as the result of our faith, we know who to honor, and who did it.

God had an answer when Sarah laughed because she was thinking naturally. His answer: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” The very fact that something is beyond human capabilities, tells us that only God is responsible.

5. **Develop “contradiction language.”** This means that recognizing the presence of a contradiction in your life ought to signal for you a “high alert” about your language. There are certain things you simply cannot say. When Job had been restored to health and prosperity after his trial, the Lord was adamant about His disapproval of Job’s friends, saying that they had not “spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has”(Job 42:9). The book of James (which has a lot to say throughout it about the power of our daily language) tells us that speculating on the future, without considering God’s active role in it, is futile: “Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that’” (James 4:15.) And finally, take your fears to the Lord about the dangers you feel you face. In the book of Acts, when Peter and John were facing imprisonment, they prayed, “Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak Your word with great boldness” (Acts 4:29) – a statement that acknowledged the “facts” of the situation, but put them at the Lord’s doorstep for consideration.
6. **Don’t let the contradiction define the situation.** If we believe what 1 Peter chapter 1, Hebrews chapter 12, and other scriptures teach us about trials, they’re not about the situations themselves but about how we respond to them –opportunities to let God work, to build our faith, to triumph. Many times we wish we could really show our faith like those of the first century who gave up their lives for the cause of Christ, but often we pass up our own opportunities for taking a stand for the promises of God in our own lives. A financial reversal, then, would not be about what we don’t have or no longer have; it is about looking earnestly for God’s provision in it. After all, when we’re comfortable and have all we need, how do we know that God is providing? It is only when we are without our own resources that we can see Him working.

In Exodus 15, 16 and 17 we see the sad story of how the children of Israel forgot what God had just done for them by getting them out of Egypt, rescuing them from Pharaoh’s army, and giving them manna and quail. Worse than that, they forgot the promises of God that all those provisions signified. Instead, they let the contradiction of their own needs define the situation and begged to go back to the slavery of Egypt. The promises were meaningless to them, His miracles had been

wasted on them as they defined their situation not as another opportunity for God to step forward and keep His promises but as the defeat of God.

Questions for Discussion with Class

- 1) From the account in the book of Genesis, in what good ways did Abraham deal with the contradictions he faced? In what harmful ways did he deal with them?
- 2) From the account in Romans 4:16-24, what do we learn about the way Abraham faced contradictions to the promises he'd received?
- 3) From the account in Hebrews 11, what do we learn about the way Abraham faced contradictions to the promises he'd received?
- 4) This question, and those that follow, will ask that you examine your own life for a contradiction to a promise made by God. (First, of course, you would need to identify the promise of God for which you perceive a contradiction.)
 - a. In what active way could you, in your personal phase of contradiction, "look to the Lord"?
 - b. What marks of a contradiction do you see that alert you to the fact that you are indeed in a period of contradiction?
 - c. In what active way could you elevate the promise above the contradiction?
 - d. Do you honestly believe that there is a non-natural "solution" to the contradiction? Why or why not?
 - e. What would be a statement of "contradiction language" concerning your situation?
 - f. In what ways have you let the contradiction define your situation? What changes could you make to correct that?

"Yeah, but..." "Is every period of contradiction just a sign of God's approval? Don't trials sometime indicate we're doing something wrong?"

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