

Lesson Twelve

Review from Previous Lesson: In Lesson Eleven we looked again at the life of Abraham to see ways that “the father of the faithful” dealt with the contradictions to God’s promises in his life. *We saw that the primary means of dealing with a contradiction is not personal action, but language and attitude.*

The Problem: We find it difficult to assess a physical, “in your face,” situation of trial by looking at it in an abstract way. We need assurance that there is something more significant going on in our lives, something of which God is not just aware, but actively involved.

Why the problem persists in churches: Churches often offer workshops on solving marital problems, getting out of debt, raising children, and other matters; but we rarely see workshops that give us practical ways to build our faith. Most often, what we would call contradictions we see as problems for us to tackle, not situations in which God wants to build our faith and show us how to depend on Him. We want to solve our own situations, not have them resolved by God – mainly because He usually doesn’t operate on our timetables.

Underlying Assumptions As Expressed in Everyday Language:

1. If it’s a real-world situation, there’s a real-world solution.
2. How can I tell if God is testing me, or punishing me?
3. Doing nothing but praying about a situation seems lazy and irresponsible to me.
4. It is hard for me to see the involvement of God in my situation.
5. Not everything is a matter of faith. Some things just need to be dealt with and gotten out of the way because they have nothing to do with spiritual matters.
6. Looking at Scripture, I’m not sure I want to wait for God to resolve a situation when I think I could figure out a way to solve it myself more quickly.

Background Reading Before Teaching This Lesson: Again 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 again 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 conclude our study of the Phases of Faith by looking at six additional ways to relate to a contradiction in our personal lives.

1. **Understand the role of correction.** Abraham was good at taking correction: when Abimelech and Pharaoh brought him messages from the Lord, he responded immediately. Jesus commended Abraham for that attitude, and contrasted it to the intentions of the arrogant Jews who wanted to murder Him for His teachings. “You are determined to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things” (John 8:40.) Abraham was also willing to listen to Sarah (even when she gave him bad advice!)

You may need a period of personal introspection to determine whether the contradiction in your life is God’s way of getting your attention about a sin or failing in your life. Solitude, praying for wisdom (see James 1:5), fasting, and asking advice from a spiritual mentor who knows you well are all ways of assessing this.

2. **Internalize the principle of contravention.** God is active in the life of a Christian, even helping to “clean up” after our mistakes for us, as He did for Abraham.

We must operate on the Biblical assumption that things would be a whole lot worse in our lives if we didn’t have a very active God who is always working on our behalf, even when we don’t see it. Psalm 124 tells us about the principle of contravention—that without the foreknowledge and active help of God, the undeniable “facts” of a contradiction would overwhelm us:

Psalm 124

A song of ascents. Of David.

¹ *If the LORD had not been on our side-
let Israel say-*

² *if the LORD had not been on our side
when men attacked us,*

³ *when their anger flared against us,
they would have swallowed us alive;*

⁴ *the flood would have engulfed us,
the torrent would have swept over us,*

⁵ *the raging waters
would have swept us away.*

⁶ *Praise be to the LORD ,
who has not let us be torn by their teeth.*

⁷ *We have escaped like a bird
out of the fowler’s snare;
the snare has been broken,
and we have escaped.*

⁸ *Our help is in the name of the LORD ,
the Maker of heaven and earth.*

3. **Look for the resolution ahead.** God doesn’t put us in situations just to leave us there and let us squirm. He has a plan and a reason for everything He does, and every

promise and contradiction are followed as night follows day by a resolution. Remember what 1 Peter tells us of suffering that it is endured for a little while – so that God can lift you up? And that there is a goal of our faith which is being achieved?

We must always operate as did Abraham on the assumption that each situation we are in is resolvable. That includes health issues and troubles. No cancer is unresolvable by God. No marital distress is unresolvable by God. Nothing is hopeless, it is resolvable –but only by God. We know that He's not just tempting us to sin (James 1) and that if it's a situation where we might be tempted to sin, there's a way out.

It must be true that phase 3, the resolution, will fulfill all the requirements or conditions posed by phase 1, the promise. All contradictions in phase 2 will be resolved in the resolution that God will bring about. Abraham operated on this kind of faith. When he went up on the mountain to offer his only beloved son, he assured his servants that "the boy and I will come back." That's the kind of faith God requires of us--not that we accurately predict -- or even understand-- how He will resolve a situation; just that we trust that He surely will.

4. Look back to previous third-phase resolutions. The only reason why Abraham could unquestioningly take his only son to Mt. Moriah was because he knew and understood the God of third-phase resolutions, who could be trusted because He'd shown His power in the past. That might seem at first to be impossible to you, because you may not personally have seen that kind of power in your own life. But remember that if we take the representations of the Bible as being as valid and as real as our own experiences, that means that you have experienced such things. You were a slave in Egypt. You stood by the cross, you saw the risen Lord. Even better than that, you actually participated in a third-phase resolution when you were baptized:

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

⁵If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. ⁶For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin-- ⁷because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

⁸Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

--Romans 6:4-8.

5. Wait. The most often-repeated commandment in the Bible is to wait on the Lord, yet it is probably one of the hardest for us to keep. We want to take action, to solve our own problems, to not be accused of being lazy or uncaring. Many times we are so busy solving our own problems that we can't see the way of escape before us, or we walk right past the manna He is providing.

Sometimes He actually hems us in so we don't have any choice; and thus we should be careful to see that not as a restriction but as a protection. When the children of Israel were crossing the Red Sea, God had the waters pile up on each side of them. (It's a great miracle to have the waters pile up upstream, but to have them pile up downstream is a hydraulic impossibility except by God.) Not only did that define the path the Israelites were to walk in, it kept the Egyptian army from dividing and flanking them on the side to attack them there. And God let the armies of Pharaoh, those men furious with the tears of mourning for their dead children still wet on their cheeks, God let those men get through the Sea too, almost to the other side before He made the wheels of their chariots fall off so they couldn't retreat and then had the waters released to cover them up forever.

Sometimes God lets a situation get to the point of looking completely hopeless from the human point of view so that we will clearly recognize it's His power that has rescued us from it. But unless we're willing to wait, to let it get to that point, we can't know for sure that God has done it. A good example of this was in what Jesus did when His good friend Lazarus was ill. He waited until Lazarus's sisters Mary and Martha were past all hope, because Lazarus had died. This miracle proved to be pivotal in the creation of faith in some who saw it, and great anger toward Jesus in others – because, while some people could have “explained away” Lazarus' recovery from a serious illness, but no one but God could raise him from the dead.

In the desert, the Israelites had to depend on non-natural food, the manna that fell around their camp every 24 hours. They couldn't store it up for a week or hurry its production. They had to wait – but there was never any doubt about where it came from.

Sometimes we just need to be still. At the brink of disaster, Moses told the people: “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.” –Exodus 14:13-14.

6. **Rejoice.** First Peter 1 and Hebrews 12 that we looked at earlier in this study tell us that we're not to just face contradictions gritting our teeth, but that we are to have a mindset of joy. Our speech and our demeanor must proclaim that. We've been counted worthy to be treated like God's true sons and daughters, and we value the opportunity to see Him work clearly in our lives and to increase our faith.

Questions for Discussion with Class

As we did last week, we will look at contradictions to the promises of God in our own lives and determine how we can Biblically deal with those contradictions.

1. What will you do to determine whether your contradiction(s) are the testing of your faith, or correction?
2. What could you say about your situation that acknowledges the principle of contravention?
3. What can you do to indicate to yourself and others that you are looking not for a solution but a coming resolution by God?
4. Think of a previous contradiction in your life which was resolved by God. (If you cannot think of one, use the experiences of Abraham.) How can looking at that past situation give you hope for your present phase of contradiction?
5. Scripture teaches us that God wants us to rely on Him in every situation. Does waiting always mean doing nothing? (Look at the lives of Abraham and Joseph to help you answer this.) How can you be sure that you are waiting on God for resolution?
6. How can an understanding of the Phases of Faith help you to rejoice? What does it mean to rejoice?

“Yeah, but... “We’re learning that faithfulness is as much about language as it is action. Why all the emphasis on language?”

I